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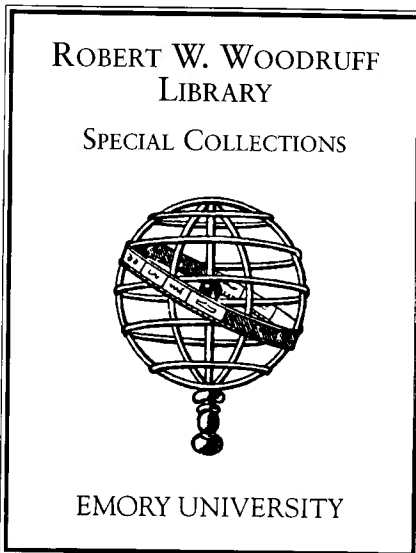
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XI.

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THE CATASTROPHE.



Part II.

A TERRIBLE MYSTERY.

I.

ALL along the outer boulevards of Paris from the Ternes to Belleville there was no better café than the "Café de Périclès," which, thanks to its brilliant lights, could be distinguished a quarter of a league away when the twilight had set in. It had been opened in 1865 on the ground floor of a new house by a Prussian named Justus Putzenhofer, who had been attracted to Paris not only by the hope of making his fortune, but also, so he declared, by his strong liking for the French nation. In conducting this establishment he was assisted by his wife, who was still young, and by a cousin who, although apallingly ugly, rejoiced in the name of Adonis, and was amiability itself. As for Madame Justus, she was short, plump and rosy, and many frequenters of the place thought her most attractive when she arranged the plates of sandwiches on the counter and poured out the foaming Bavarian beer.

No café keeper was ever so obliging towards his customers as Herr Justus. Whenever he heard a discontented grumble or a harsh exclamation he laid down his pipe and hastened to ascertain what had gone wrong. Nor was he ever courageous enough to dismiss a well-known customer at closing time. Not he—he simply put up the shutters, and after making sure that no indiscreet ray of light could be detected through the chinks by the vigilant police, he allowed his customers to tarry as long as they pleased. If this practice had been discovered the worthy German would certainly have been severely punished, as closing regulations are very strictly enforced in Paris; and for this reason he was in the habit of sending his cousin Adonis to bed on these occasions, as if he doubted his watchfulness, and mounting guard himself. Seated near the window, he watched and listened, and whenever he heard the measured tread of the police approaching on their beat he would hastily say to his belated customers: "Hush! For heaven's sake, gentlemen, speak low."

One night Justus Putzenhofer was thus engaged in listening while three habitués of his establishment played a game of cards together. One of them was a respectable gentleman of the neighbourhood, named Rivet, another a young journalist, named Aristide Peyrolas, and the third a medical practitioner who had recently taken up his abode at Montmartre, Dr. Valentin Legris, a man of thirty or thereabouts. They were busy playing, and the clock had just struck the half hour—half-past one—when all at once an appalling shriek was heard on the boulevard outside. The players instantly

threw down their cards, and simultaneously started to their feet. "Did you hear that?" they exclaimed, addressing Justus.

But the phlegmatic German was not the man to be disturbed by such a trifle. "I heard it; yes, of course I heard it. It came from one of those wretched drunkards who roam about the outer boulevards all night long, fighting and quarrelling with every one they meet. In my opinion the police would do far better to keep their eyes on the roughs, rather than meddle with an innocent fellow like myself, who interferes with nobody."

Peyrolas shrugged his shoulders. "The police!" he muttered, in tone of bitter sarcasm, "they only trouble themselves about trifles."

However, the explanation given by the Prussian seemed so plausible, that the party had already returned to their cards, when all at once there came another shriek—more terrifying even than the first one. "Help! help!" cried a voice.

This time there was no mistake; the tone was one of unspeakable agony. "It is some deed of violence!" cried the doctor, and he darted towards the door.

But prudent Justus had sprung in front of it. "Gentlemen," he pleaded, in the most imploring tone, "have you forgotten that you are here against the law? Besides, I can't allow you to run any risk."

But the gentlemen hastily thrust him aside, and taking down the bars themselves, they dashed out on to the boulevard. Nothing! Not a human being within sight. The broad thoroughfare seemed quite deserted, although through the stillness one could distinguish the distant sound of running feet.

"I told you, gentlemen, that it was nothing," said Justus.

But this was by no means the doctor's opinion. "If people run like that," he said, as he listened, "it is because some evil deed has been committed. Let us look!"

This was more easily said than done, for the night was so dark you could not see your hand before you. Moreover, a thick fog was rising, and this increased the difficulty. No matter—the party crossed the sidewalk, and examined the whole neighbourhood with infinite care. Suddenly M. Rivet uttered an exclamation, and his two companions darted towards him. "What is it?" they cried in the same breath.

"I have found something—a body here on the ground. I stumbled over it."

The doctor and Peyrolas stooped down, and perceived a man who was lying with his face in the mud, and to all appearance unconscious.

"Well, well!" muttered the journalist—"and this is Paris in 1870! People are assassinated with quite as much impunity as they used to be in the Forest of Bondy. Where on earth do the police keep themselves?"

But the doctor paid no attention to the angry journalist. He was kneeling beside the man on the ground, and trying to ascertain his condition. "He's not dead," he said at last; "and perhaps we may be able to revive him." And, with little regard for the fears of the terrified Prussian, he called: "Hullo, Justus! Come and help us to carry this poor devil into your place."

The German was a man who knew how to extract good from evil; so he meekly obeyed, and carried the unconscious man in his own robust arms into the café, where he laid him on a billiard-table.

The card players were then able to examine the man whose life they had in all probability saved. He was a handsome fellow, between twenty-five and thirty, wearing a full black beard. The light of the lamp, suspended

above the billiard-table, fell full on his face, and showed how extremely pale he was. His clothes were covered with mud and blood, but they were elegant and well made; while his linen was exquisitely fine and white. There was one singular circumstance; several tiny scraps of paper had remained between his half-parted lips, as if, at the very moment when he lost his consciousness, he had had coolness enough to swallow some dangerous document. But the doctor was the only one who noticed this, and he did not speak of it. He rolled up his sleeves, and as he proceeded to divest the unconscious man of his clothes, he called for some water, a sponge, and old linen. "And wake your wife instantly, Justus," he said, "she must scrape some lint for me."

But it was unnecessary to summon Madame Justus, for at this moment she appeared, shivering in her dressing-gown, and upon perceiving the young man stretched out on the billiard-table, she gave vent to shriek after shriek. "Hush!" said her husband. "It's a poor fellow whom I rescued from some murderers just now;" for Justus began to realise that he might make something out of the affair. "He will come to, Dr. Legris, will he not?"

"Yes!" said the doctor, who had finished his examination of the wound. "It is not as bad as I thought. If the blow which he received here on the shoulder had fallen on his neck, he would, at this minute be as dead as Julius Caesar—for a knife sharp enough to have made this gash would have speedily severed the artery. But as it is he will be on his feet again in less than a month's time."

While Justus and his wife were listening to the doctor, the journalist had drawn Rivet aside, and was exclaiming with an inspired air, "I shall write an article on this subject, at once—it shall be one to move the masses. I shall say that the present government employs the police to organize rows and riots, while these roughs assassinate us. I shall draw up a petition——"

"Do be quiet," interrupted the doctor, impatiently, "for the poor fellow is coming to himself."

The wounded man had indeed opened his eyes—and with the assistance of Justus had raised himself to a sitting position. He looked about him with wild, affrighted eyes—knowing neither the room in which he found himself, nor the persons by whom he was surrounded.

"I must thank you, gentlemen," he faltered at last, "for having saved my life at the risk of your own."

The doctor here stopped him. "Our merit is not as great as you imagine," he said. "When we reached you your would-be murderers had fled."

Intense astonishment was depicted on the countenance of the wounded man. "Had fled!" he muttered; "fled without killing me!" And as if a sudden thought struck him. "Have I been robbed?" he hastily asked.

His clothes were given him, and he found that his watch and purse had disappeared. "Then they were thieves after all!" he said, as if this loss proved the falsity of some previous conviction.

The journalist and his quiet friend, M. Rivet, paid no attention to the man's strange manner. But Dr. Legris duly noted it. It is really a little odd, he thought, that this man should be so astonished at not having been murdered; and it is strange that he should be assaulted at this hour, and in this part of Paris, for any other cause than robbery. Suspecting some mystery, the practitioner exclaimed, "Have you any idea who the men were who attacked you?"

"Not the slightest."

"Should you know them again?"

"I did not even see them."

"The night is certainly very dark, but——"

"My dear sir, I was flat on the ground before I realized that I was surrounded by murderers," cried the young fellow. "If I had received the slightest warning I should have defended myself—and successfully too!" And he unquestionably would have done so, for all about him indicated strength and activity. "The snare was skilfully managed," he continued, "I was on my way home, and had just passed this café, when I heard some one groaning. I stood still and listened. I heard the groans again, and on looking about I finally discovered a man half lying on the ground. I leaned over him, and as I did so, I received a blow from a heavy stick on my head, and was felled to the ground."

"The assassins were hiding behind a tree, I suppose," said M. Rivet, sagely.

"I was merely stunned," continued the stranger, "and in a moment or two I realized where I was; but, as I struggled to my feet, again, I suddenly felt a sharp pain between my shoulders, and uttered a shriek, I fear. I remember nothing more."

To all appearance the doctor heard this narrative unmoved, but he was watching the young man very closely. "Very well," he said, "you must make a formal complaint, and give your evidence to-morrow morning."

But the stranger started. "No, no!" he cried; "on no account whatever." And he spoke these words in such a tone of terror, that every one except the doctor was astonished.

"Upon my word!" Rivet whispered to the journalist, "one would think he was afraid of seeing the inside of a law court!"

The stranger in some measure, realised the effect he had produced, and spoke again: "I shall make no complaint; and if you are willing, gentlemen, to add another favour to the very great one you have already done me, you will entirely forget to-night's occurrence."

The anxiety with which he awaited a reply was so evident that the doctor took pity on him. "We will respect your secret, sir," he said; "you have our word to that effect."

"Agreed," added Peyrolas, "and yet what an article I could have made out of it!"

This point having been settled, the wounded man seemed to feel infinite relief, drank a soothing mixture handed him by Madame Justus, and declared he was well enough to go home. And, as his new friends assisted him in putting on his coat, he added: "My name is Raymond Delorge, gentleman, and I reside in the Rue Blanche. I hope at some future time to show you my gratitude." But he had over-estimated his strength, for as he tried to walk, he tottered. "I don't like this," he said; "my head swims and my limbs seem very weak."

"I knew you could not walk home," said the doctor; "but as your heart seemed set upon it, I decided to let you see for yourself. Adonis has gone for a vehicle, and one will be here immediately."

Cabs pass all night along the Boulevard de Clichy, and the landlord's cousin had but little difficulty in procuring one. The doctor helped the wounded man into the vehicle, and then took a seat by his side, while the driver snapped his whip over the weary horses. Rarely had Dr. Legris' curiosity been so much excited, and he with difficulty repressed the innumerable questions which hovered on his lips. However Raymond Delorge did

not seem to notice this as he quietly asked, "Do you think, doctor, that I shall be obliged to remain in bed for any time?"

"For a few days—yes."

"But it will be more than an inconvenience to me—it will be a positive misfortune."

"But——"

"And that's not all. I am at a loss to know how I can account for this accident. I have lost my father, and reside with my mother and sister, and I have every wish to spare them unnecessary alarm. They are naturally nervous."

"Say nothing about it then—hide the garments which would tell the story—and simply call yourself indisposed."

"I was thinking of that—but I shall need a medical man."

"Who, of course, must be your accomplice," hastily interrupted the doctor. "Very well, I will come and see you." He almost instantly regretted the precipitation with which he had made this offer, but he had no time to say anything more, for the cab stopped. The young man alighted slowly, but without assistance, and as he clutched hold of the knob on the door of the house he lived at, he exclaimed: "You will excuse me, doctor, if I do not ask you to come in to-night, but I know very well that my mother never closes her eyes until I return home, and the fact of another person being with me at this late hour would seem very strange to her. I must also ask you, sir, to kindly pay the driver, for the scoundrels have left me without a penny."

"All right. But you must not stand here in the night air. Be very prudent. You will see me at noon." And thereupon the doctor dismissed the cab, preferring to walk home.

"What a strange adventure!" he muttered as he went along, "and what a strange fellow! What could that letter have been which he swallowed? And why is he unwilling to enter a complaint? However, I flatter myself that I shall find out the enigma to-morrow, and so I won't puzzle myself about it to-night."

But this was easier said than done, and the fact is that Dr. Legris' busy brain worked on, refusing to rest. The next day it was with the greatest difficulty that he refrained from calling at the house in the Rue Blanche before twelve o'clock, but, in fact, the hour had barely struck when he rung at the door. An old man servant, who looked like a retired veteran, at once answered the ring, and he had evidently been warned, for, on perceiving the doctor, he exclaimed: "My young master expects you, and if you will kindly follow me, I will show you to his room."

The doctor found his patient much better than he had ventured to expect, and, when he had examined the wound and prescribed the proper course to follow, he took a chair, vaguely hoping for some clue to the mystery. But the wounded man did not make the slightest allusion to the affair, except to say, in answer to a question, that his mother had no suspicion that anything out of the common way had happened. He then at once turned the conversation into another channel.

This was the result of Dr. Legris' daily visits for more than a week. He was always received most cordially by Raymond, who welcomed him more-over with an air of especial frankness, as if he desired to keep up this chance acquaintance; but any allusions to himself, his own affairs, and his family, were carefully avoided. Ten days elapsed without the doctor even seeing his patient's mother or sister. And when of an evening Peyrolas, the

journalist, or Rivet asked for news of young Delorge, the mortified medical man could only say, "He's the same as cured now, and he will come in here some evening. He is a good enough fellow in his way, but uncommonly reserved. He was a pupil in the Polytechnique School, and became a civil engineer."

This was, indeed, all that the doctor had discovered up to a certain carnival Sunday—the 28th of February, 1870—when at about five o'clock in the afternoon he called on Raymond. His patient started on seeing him, and exclaimed, "I was afraid, doctor, that you wouldn't come!" The young fellow's usual apathy of manner had vanished, and he spoke in an agitated voice, while his eyes glittered with fever. "Has anything happened?" asked Dr. Legris.

Instead of speaking Raymond took a letter from his table and handed it to his friend. This missive bore no signature, and it was written on coarse paper in red ink. It ran as follows:—"An event which Monsieur Delorge must witness will occur to-night. He *must* go to the ball at La Reine Blanche. A man will go up to him and say, 'I come from the Garden of the Elysée.' Monsieur Delorge must follow that man, wherever he leads him. If he is not willing to do this for his own sake, he will do it for hers; and let him believe, in following these instructions, that they come from a friend."

The doctor perused this singular communication, and then quietly said, "I think your enemies wish to finish the work they began the other night."

"And yet," answered Raymond, gravely, "It is my duty to obey this letter."

He spoke in so firm a tone that the doctor did not dream of contesting the point. "At least," he said, "you must not go alone!"

Raymond had apparently expected this reply, for he looked Dr. Legris full in the face, and said, "Unfortunately, I have no one whom I can apply to. My life is a singularly lonely one. My only two intimate friends are far away. Where could I hope to find a man who would brave unknown danger for my sake, and first swear absolute secrecy?"

It was not mere curiosity that actuated the doctor now. Little as he knew young Delorge, he had learned to appreciate many excellent qualities he possessed. He had taken a strange liking to him, and having once rescued him from death, he did not hesitate now that danger showed itself anew. "Who will do it?" he replied in a firm voice. "Why, I will—yes, I will go with you, and I will swear to be dumb."

And, indeed, a few hours later Dr. Legris and Raymond Delorge were on their way to the dancing hall appointed by the anonymous letter.

II.

WHEN you reach the top of the Rue Fontaine-Sainte-Georges of an evening you can perceive straight in front of you, on the other side of the outer boulevard, a large number of gas burners, arranged as a garland above a very spacious portal. This conducts to the Bal de la Reine Blanche, one of the typical dancing establishments of Paris. On the right hand side is a wine shop, divided by flimsy partitions into a number of private compartments. On the left there is a cheap pastry cook's, where the working people in the neighbourhood come to purchase dainties of the most appalling description—fruit tarts and cakes garnished with cream. It is not the *élite* of

Paris who dance at La Reine Blanche—but decency of appearance, manners, and conduct are strictly exacted. On ball nights—that is to say on Sundays, Mondays, and Thursdays—crowds of young fellows with shiny caps and equally lustrous hair, are to be seen hurrying towards the establishment. It was an especially festive occasion the evening when Raymond Delorge and Dr. Legris presented themselves at the door. Two huge placards—one on each side of the portal—announced that a grand and fancy masked ball would take place that night in honour of the Carnival. They walked in and followed a long avenue, planted on each side with evergreens, till they reached a vestibule, where two attendants were on duty. Thence they passed into the ballroom, which was not unlike a large barn in its proportions, being extremely narrow and long, with a very low ceiling, ornamented with extraordinary frescoes. At the further end was a raised platform, where serious-minded people talked and drank, while the floor—or rather the space reserved for dancers—was encompassed by a ballustrade, beyond which a number of small tables were arranged.

The *fete* was at its height when our two friends entered. Amid the din of a number of trombones and other noisy instruments, some two hundred persons of either sex—allegedly red and out of breath—were dancing in a state of wild enthusiasm and excitement which made them seem as if they had fallen victims to an epileptic attack. Seated at the tables round about another couple of hundred more persons of both sexes were drinking wine and beer with unextinguishable thirst. The heat was intense, the gas blazed, and the odour was unendurable, while from the floor there rose a cloud of dust, which settled on the coats and dresses of the dancers.

Despite the placards, which promised a masquerade, there were very few fancy costumes among the dubious-looking coats. And what costumes they were :—nameless rags, which had done duty year after year, at Carnival after Carnival, on the backs of bibulous, disorderly fellows, who had covered them with wine stains at *barrière* drinking dens. It was only with some difficulty that the doctor and Raymond found a place on the platform, whence they could overlook the scene, and a vacant table. Hardly were they seated than a waiter appeared, and asked what he should bring them. “Two glasses of beer,” said the doctor in reply.

Thanks to his height and his square shoulders, and the stentorian voice with which he shouted, “By your leave !” the waiter was able to shove through the crowd, and could soon be seen returning with the beer ; but before he put down the tray, he exclaimed : “Twenty sous—in advance as usual.” Dr. Legris paid the sum mechanically, without paying attention to the singularity of the demand. He had placed himself at Raymond’s disposal, and had determined not to evince the least inquisitiveness, no matter how much he might feel. On his side Raymond Delorge was at a thousand leagues from the present situation. With his elbows resting on the wine-stained table, and his eyes fixed on vacancy, he sat, absorbed in painful thought. He did not seem cognizant of where he found himself, and failed to notice that polkas were succeeding quadrilles, and waltzes, mazurkas, and time fast passing on. The doctor, however, was by no means so indifferent to the passage of time ; he repeatedly drew out his watch, and finally, losing patience, he shook his companion’s arm, exclaiming : “Do you know that the night is wearing on, and that our man has not yet put in an appearance ? If your letter should prove to be a stupid mystification—

Raymond started like a sleeper who is suddenly awakened. “Impossible !” he replied.

"And why? This letter alludes to a mysterious 'she'—a 'she' who loves you probably. May it not be that——"
"You are quite off the track," answered Raymond with some impatience. "You remember the words of the letter, don't you. The man who will accost me is to say, 'I come from the Garden of the Elysée!' Very well, it was there that my father, General Delorge, was killed, on the 30th of November, 1851."

Raymond's tone, and the fierce gleam in his eyes awoke a thousand conjectures in the doctor's mind. But he had no time to reply, for his attention was attracted by one of the rare maskers in the ball-room, who had been watching them for some time already. He was a short man, of decidedly commonplace appearance, although his costume comprised a pair of velvet knee breeches, a cloak faced with satin, which had been white, and a Spanish vest, to which half the buttons were lacking. On his head he wore a red *toque* with a long plume.

"Can this be the fellow?" thought Dr. Legris.

He was not mistaken in his conjecture, for suddenly the man approached Raymond, tapped him familiarly on the shoulder, and, in a voice hoarse by addiction to alcohol, exclaimed: "I come from the Garden of the Elysée."

As if he had been worked by a spring, young Delorge rose to his feet and replied: "I am ready to follow you."

"In that case come quick, for I am very late," and the man took off his mask and wiped his face.

This gave Dr. Legris great satisfaction, and, studying the man's countenance, he said to himself: "He is utterly incapable of a crime; but I wonder if he proposes to go out with us in that dress?"

To the physician's relief, however, as soon as the unknown individual reached the vestibule, he took up a long cloak and threw it over his shoulders, at the same time exchanging his plumed *toque* for a shabby felt hat. Then, with an air of self-congratulation, he muttered: "It does not take me long to change my skin; and if your legs are as good as mine——" But he suddenly stopped, realizing, in fact, for the first time, that Raymond was not alone. "Oh! oh! oh!" he exclaimed—each oh! being ejaculated in a higher key than the preceding one—"I was told that there was only one person——"

The doctor was about to speak, when Raymond silenced him with a gesture. "If this gentleman cannot go with me," he said quietly, "I shall give up the idea entirely."

The masquerader was evidently perplexed, and angrily scratched his nose. This was probably a habit with him when he wished to quicken his thoughts, and it apparently succeeded on this occasion, for he suddenly exclaimed: "What a fool I am! I can settle it in a minute. Don't move." And, so saying, he dashed into the ball-room.

"We are fools!" exclaimed Dr. Legris. "This fellow has gone back for instructions; so the person who employs him—the author of the anonymous letter—is in the ball-room. I will follow him and see whom he speaks to!"

But no—it was too late, for at that very moment the man reappeared. "It's all right!" he said carelessly. "You can both go; it's just the same in the end."

As they left the dancing hall, the clock struck one. The economical administration of La Reine Blanche had extinguished the outer gaslights at midnight. The pastry-cook had put up his shutters, and all was dark and quiet in the streets. Not even a cab was to be seen on the Boulevard de Clichy, and it was only at a distance that a police officer could be perceived

making his lonely rounds. The weather, which had been bad enough all day, had now become perfectly frightful. A perfect tornado was blowing over Paris, twisting the young trees on the boulevard, hurling chimney-pots from the houses, and ripping the slates off the roofs. Still the night was not dark, and at times the moon peered through the clouds which were hurrying across the sky, its disc being mirrored in the shining pools of the sidewalks and the gutters.

But little did the doctor or Raymond care for the weather. They pulled their coat-collars up to their ears and silently followed their guide, who, with his hands in his pockets, whistled as he trudged along. On leaving *La Reine Blanche* he turned in the direction of *Batignolles*, but suddenly stopping short, he entered the avenue leading to the *Montmartre* or *Northern Cemetery*. It is a wide avenue, where funeral trinkets and emblems are sold of a daytime, but which has no other outlet than the portal of the cemetery, seen at the further end. The doctor was aware of this, and so, abruptly stopping, he called to the guide. "Where on earth are you taking us?"

"Just where I was told."

"I dare say. But that gate yonder must be shut, as it always is at night time, and except by retracing our steps there is no exit from this place."

"I dare say," repeated the man; "but you had better come on all the same."

"One moment," said the doctor, and hurriedly addressing Raymond in a low voice, he added: "If you knew me better than you do, it would not be necessary for me to tell you that I am not the man to draw back from a thing I undertake. But I confess that I do like to know what I am about. Our expedition seems to me a most singular affair. Excuse my questions—but nine times out of ten when a man receives an anonymous letter he knows what name to put at the bottom of it."

Raymond stopped with a gesture. "The letter may have come either from a mortal enemy or from a devoted friend—that is all I can tell you."

Dr. Legris smiled, as if quite satisfied with this evasive reply; and then, in a surly sort of tone he said to the guide, "Go on."

The man thereupon approached the gate of the cemetery, and was about to pull the bell, when Raymond caught him by the arm. "Take care," he said, "neither my friend nor myself are persons whom you can joke with, with impunity."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "I'm ordered to give you no explanation whatever," he said. "I've received my instructions, and I obey them. If you wish to conclude this affair you must let me do as I'm bid. If you're afraid you had best go back. It doesn't make the smallest difference to me. I'm paid in advance." And so speaking, he jostled some silver in the pockets of his velvet breeches.

"But——"

"There's no but—it must be yes or no—and you must say the word at once, for I've no desire to melt away in this rain. Still I must make one remark before we go any further. If you utter a single word it may cost us dear—you must keep very quiet. We are playing for heavier stakes than you imagine."

Dr. Legris leaned toward his companion. "Let us go on," he whispered.

"So be it," said Raymond, "and we won't speak except in a whisper."

The man thereupon rang the bell. Two minutes elapsed—a sound of footsteps was heard, two or three oaths were sworn, and then the gate was

opened. A man carrying a lantern, and apparently just aroused from bed, for his nightcap was drawn over his ears, appeared at the portal. "What do you want?" he roughly asked.

The guide pulled a paper out of his pocket and thrust it under the eyes of the man with the nightcap, who calmly hung his lantern on the bolt of the door and examined this paper, scrutinizing certain stamps it bore. "How many of you are there?" he said, as he finished.

"Three."

"Come in then."

They obeyed, and having carefully closed the door, the keeper asked: "There's no need of my going with you, I suppose."

"Not in the least," answered the guide.

"Well, then I shall turn in—so good-night." And thus speaking the keeper lounged back into his lodge, swinging his lantern as he went.

The man from La Reine Blanche watched him depart with an air of profound indifference; but when the door closed and all was dark again, he drew a long breath of relief, as if he had escaped some great danger. "Good-riddance to you!" he muttered, snapping his fingers. Raymond and his friend were more puzzled than ever, but he apparently cared little for this. "Here we are!" he gaily added, as he led them along. "Here we are!"

They were by this time at a few steps from the marble pedestal on which lies the bronze effigy of Godefroy Cavaignac. Before them, as far as the eye could reach, there stretched the immense field of rest—the City of the Dead. Certainly neither the doctor nor Raymond were accessible to those superstitious terrors which haunt weak brains—and yet, by degrees they felt that mysterious chill and awe caused by the presence of death, creep over them. At least, however, their guide did not lose heart. "The worst is done," he said; "but if we don't hurry now, we might as well have remained away. Come on!" And without the slightest hesitation, in fact as if he had been quite at home, the man turned into a wide avenue, on the right hand side, which was bordered by stately monuments.

Without an objection—without a word—the young men followed him. Where, they knew not, nor did they ask themselves, so utterly were their ideas disturbed by the strangeness of their situation. The rain had ceased falling, but the wind had increased in fury, and swept through the trees, which sighed and groaned like living things. The clouds flew across the sky, screening the moon from time to time. The shadows seemed endowed with vitality, and the white statues looked like ghosts amid the tall dark cypress trees. However, the party moved on—through several avenues, down several steps, then up a steep ascent, and finally stopped near the chapel, built by the Champdoce family.

"Halt!" exclaimed the guide. "We have reached our destination."

It was clear that he knew every foot of the ground, for he drew the young men behind a thick clump of evergreens, and bade them crouch down. They hesitated. "And what then?" asked the doctor.

"What then? Why keep your eyes and ears open, that's all you'll have to do. Look straight before you."

From the spot where they stood Raymond and the doctor could see some thirty yards in front of them, a portion of the cemetery wall, skirting the Rue de Maistre. The ground between them and this wall was level, and contained but one tomb, which was undergoing repairs. The front slab had been removed, and one could detect a narrow cavity. The workmen must have been there all day, and oddly enough, had left their tools lying about.

"And now?" began the doctor again.

"Now you are to hold your tongue and not move," answered the guide rudely.

Having reached this point in their adventure, it was not worth while for the young men to raise any objection, so they waited in anxious silence, but not without asking themselves if they were fools—if they were the victims of some practical joke. Was it possible that they had been brought to this cemetery in the middle of the night by an unknown individual whom they had met at a public ball, and who yet wore his masquerading costume? They were cogitating in this fashion when their guide suddenly started, and whispered, for the first time, with an air of emotion. "Hush! look at the wall!"

Above this wall a human figure now slowly appeared. It was that of a man, and it was light enough to see that he wore a cap and a long dark blouse. He sat himself astride on the wall and then drew up a ladder from the street, and carefully dropped it into the cemetery, securing it to the wall again as if preparing for descent. Raymond and the doctor hastily turned to their guide to question him. But he placed his hands over their mouths and murmured, "Hush! Not a word! Wait and watch!"

And presently another person appeared on the wall, dressed precisely like the first one. They seemed to be consulting each other; but at last they descended the wall, and moved about a little, evidently listening. Being finally reassured, they went back to their ladder, and probably made some signal, for almost immediately a third person appeared. So far as could be seen this third individual, by his air and dress, seemed to belong to a higher social grade than the others; he appeared, in fact, to be their master. He evidently questioned them, and satisfied by their replies, he, in his turn, made a sign to some one else in the street. The result was, that a moment later a woman's head rose above the wall.

"Well, well!" muttered the man from *La Reine Blanche*, "she is a cool one I do declare!"

The lady, for she was evidently no common woman, was dressed in black, and wore so thick a veil, that her features could not have been distinguished even in broad daylight. The gentleman offered his hand to assist her down the ladder, but she pushed him aside, and descended into the cemetery without help. The whole party now approached the tomb that was undergoing repairs, and passed so near the spot where the doctor and Raymond were concealed, that the two young fellows could hear each word that was spoken. "Here it is," said the man who seemed to be directing the enterprise.

"Very well," replied the lady, in an imperious tone; "then all we have to do is to make haste!"

As if they were only waiting for these words, the two men in blouses each took a forgotten pickaxe from the ground, and noiselessly removed the slabs of the tomb. This being accomplished, they both stooped, and with their combined strength raised a coffin. Standing beside the veiled lady, the well-dressed man was overlooking the work. "Now, Madame la Duchesse," said he, "you will see if I have deceived you. Go on," he added, turning to his men, who, with perfect ease and coolness, inserted their tools under the coffin lid and raised it with a strange cracking sound.

Then the lady, who was called Madame la Duchesse, darted forward, bent over the coffin, and plunged her arms inside. It was in a tone of wild, delicious joy, that she, at the same time exclaimed: "Empty! The coffin is empty!"

Motionless behind the cypress trees which screened them, the doctor and Raymond Delorge waited for a word which might reveal to them the meaning of this most extraordinary, almost unprecedented scene. They asked themselves what motives could induce people to scale the walls of one of the cemeteries in the heart of Paris, and violate the secrets of a tomb. But the word they waited for was not spoken. Without a syllable the lady and the gentleman turned away, and, ascending the ladder, disappeared over the wall again. The two men in blouses alone remained in the cemetery. They quickly readjusted the lid of the coffin, and placed it inside the tomb again, then they set the slabs in position, and rapidly effaced all evidence of the place having been tampered with. As soon as this work was completed they went off in their turn, taking their ladder with them over the wall. Of the scene which the doctor and Raymond had just witnessed, not a vestige remained to testify to its reality—everything had vanished as with one of those visions which haunt us during the night time and fade with dawn. It was high time, too, that the drama should end, for Raymond could bear no more. He grasped their guide by the arm and shook him vigorously. "Tell me," he said, "how dare you bring us to look on at this shameless sacrilege? Who are these people? Whose coffin is it that is empty? What have I to do with it? Give us your facts and names."

The man slowly disengaged himself. "You are off the track, master," he answered, in an impertinent tone. "The people who paid me to bring you here told me nothing of these secrets. I know nothing; but I have an idea that all you want to learn is inscribed on that tomb."

"Of course!" rejoined Raymond and the doctor at the same moment; and leaving their guide they hurried to the tomb, which was of simple aspect. The inscription it bore ran as follows:—

MARIE SIDONIE.

DIED AT THE AGE OF TWENTY-SEVEN.

Pray for her.

"Well?" ejaculated the doctor inquisitively.

But Raymond seemed utterly bewildered. "No family name," he answered, "and 'Sidonie' gives me no clue—for I have not the smallest recollection——"

"Don't trouble yourself," said the doctor; "I assure you that it is not worth while. Let us return to our guide."

This was easier said than done, however, for when they reached the clump of cypresses again their man had fled. They called—no answer. They listened—not a sound. They looked around—not a human being in sight. "We are nicely fooled," said the doctor, in a tone rather of anger than surprise; "fooled as if we were children."

"But this man——"

"Is far away, I fancy. Still, there's little probability of his getting out at this hour. We shall find him, no doubt, for I see no way of leaving ourselves." This was true enough, and yet a moment later the doctor cried: "Never mind, I have a plan, and its very audacity may bring success. Let us get to the gate again."

Unfortunately, they were so little acquainted with the cemetery that they had not the least idea in what part of it they stood. They wandered on among the tombs, and Raymond nervously exclaimed: "Suppose we were found here, how on earth should we explain our presence?"

That situation was indeed perplexing ; but at last the doctor thought he recognized the avenue they had first taken. He was right ; for on following it they soon beheld the *rond-point* and the keeper's lodge. "Now for it !" whispered the doctor, and he immediately tapped at the window.

"Who goes there ?" called a voice from within.

"It's us, of course," answered the doctor, sturdily. "We want to go out."

"What, already ? Your companion, who has just gone, told me you would stay till daybreak."

"We've changed our minds."

"Then wait a moment," said the guard, "and I'll be there." He was not very long, to be sure, in making an appearance, and he then at once opened the gate, exclaiming, "Till next time !" as the doctor and Raymond hastily passed out. M. Legris did not answer this remark, however ; he was rubbing his hands, and then, as soon as the gate was closed behind him, he muttered, "We have our man."

III.

THE doctor founded all his hopes upon a single and a seemingly unimportant circumstance, which had totally escaped Raymond. On the road to the cemetery their guide had remarked : "Do you think it was for my own pleasure that I left the ball, just when I was enjoying it most, and had made a chance acquaintance ?" From this the doctor leaped to the conclusion that this mysterious person would return to his interrupted amusement.

"Unless he thinks we mean to follow him," objected Raymond.

"That's just what he won't do ! He thinks us shut up in the cemetery for the rest of the night. I'm only afraid of one thing—that the ball may be over."

It was not, however, for on reaching the *Barrière Blanche* they saw the windows of the dancing hall still flaring with lights.

"Shall we go in ?" asked Raymond.

The doctor hesitated. "No," he replied ; "in my opinion it would be unwise to do so, for, of course, it is to this person's interest to avoid us——"

"Yes," interrupted Raymond, hastily, "that may be so, but for ours he must speak, and I propose to shake the truth out of him !"

"Let me take the lead in the matter, my dear friend," replied Dr. Legris. "Believe me, we must act with the greatest possible caution. I, naturally, have more *sang-froid* than you ; so wait here while I go in and cautiously reconnoitre."

At *La Reine Blanche*, as at all public balls at carnival time, there was a room where fancy costumes could be hired. The doctor at once went there, and, for the sum of three francs and ten sous, an old woman, who looked very much like a witch, placed a long nondescript garment of black alpaca, which she dignified by the name of "domino," at his disposal. This so-called domino was dirty and altogether unpleasant in smell, and at any other moment it would surely have repelled our fastidious friend. But this was no time to stand and deliberate, so, thrusting his arms into the sleeves, and pulling the hood over his head, he made his way into the ball-room.

Only some sixty or eighty indefatigable dancers remained there. The doctor looked about, and in a corner, seated at a table, he perceived the mysterious guide. Beside him sat a remarkable being in the dress of a Bayadère—a woman at once surprisingly ugly and excessively thin.

"Luck is on our side!" thought Dr. Legris, and leaving the ball-room, he got rid of his domino and hastened back to Raymond.

"Now," he said to him, "we have only to discover where this man lives and what his name is. To do this we had better take a cab and sit in it and watch until we see him leave the ball. As soon as he comes out we will tell the driver to follow him wherever he goes—whether on foot or in a vehicle. It is certainly an odd business we are engaged in, but I see no other way of finding out the truth."

Raymond agreed to the proposal, and scarcely had he and Dr. Legris installed themselves in a passing cab than their whilom guide appeared with the emaciated Bayadère on his arm. He had resumed his cloak, and his companion had thrown a red and black plaid shawl over her shoulders. The doctor at once peered through the window behind the driver, and pointed these two figures out to him. "Follow them," he said, "and don't let them suspect your purpose. If you succeed you shall have twenty francs."

"All right!" replied the driver with a wink, and they started off.

Day was breaking, and, as is usually the case after a tempest, the morning was a clear one. The street-sweepers were already abroad with their brooms, and the thoroughfares leading from the heights of Montmartre were full of workmen repairing to their daily toil. However, the man in the cloak and his companion were not disturbed by the jeers and jibes they encountered as they went along the Boulevard Rochechouart, but answered back good-naturedly. Their destination seemed a long way off, but finally, after turning innumerable corners, they reached the Rue Feutrier.

The cab thereupon abruptly drew up, and the driver, leaning towards his "fares," exclaimed: "Your maskers have entered that house!" And he pointed to a building of wretched appearance, above the door of which appeared a notice: "Furnished rooms to let." At the door sat a stout man, wearing a blue apron and smoking a matutinal pipe.

"Are you the master of this house?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, sir," answered the man, taking off his cap as he spoke.

"We want to inquire about a person who has just entered—a man wearing a cloak."

"Who was with a lady?"

"Precisely. My friend and I wish to see him on a matter of great importance—a matter which involves much money."

The landlord raised his arms with a despairing gesture. "Too bad!" he cried, "too bad!"

"What do you mean?"

"Monsieur Potencier—for that is his name—is no longer one of my lodgers."

"But he just went in."

The landlord smiled. "That's so; but he and the lady only went through the house," and moving aside he pointed to an interminable passage, which ended in another street.

This was like a pail of cold water thrown on the heads of the doctor and his friend. It was most irritating to have taken so much trouble for such a humiliating result. However, M. Legris was not discouraged. "If Monsieur Potencier is not your tenant, you can at least give us his present address?"

"No, indeed. He doesn't like to have people meddle with his affairs, and so he always keeps himself very quiet."

"So you can't tell us where he resides?"

"It's quite impossible."

The doctor pulled out his pocket-book and seemed to be looking for something. The three or four hundred franc notes which it contained seemed to multiply indefinitely as he fingered them. "It's a great pity," he said, "for Monsieur Potencier to lose so much money. But perhaps this may do. Send him this card, and tell him I wish to see him as soon as possible," and so saying he extended a piece of pasteboard, which was simply his own professional card:

DR. VALENTINE LEGRIS,
PLACE DU THEATRE, MONTMARTRE.
Consultations daily from one to three.
Free on Mondays and Thursdays.

The aspect of the doctor's well-filled pocket-book seemed to have made a profound impression on the landlord of the house. "I don't think," he said, "that I shall be able to execute this commission; but I will keep your card, and if I should happen to see Monsieur Potencier——"

"You will give it to him? Thank you; and now good morning."

Of course the doctor did not imagine that his card would call forth a visit from Monsieur Potencier, but he was one of those persons who never leave a stone unturned. "This man has escaped us," he said to Raymond as they went back to their vehicle. "I doubt if we shall set eyes on him again!"

"I don't know about that," answered Raymond, "for I have just got an idea. How did we manage to get into the cemetery? Was it not through a paper which he presented to the keeper, who, after reading it, put it into his pocket? Must not this paper have been a permit given by the Administrative Bureau, on some pretext which, of course, we can't divine, but which——"

"You are right," answered the doctor; "I agree with you entirely."

"Well, then, this permit must, of course, bear the name of the person it was given to, so that if the keeper still has it in his possession, and would permit us to look at it——"

Dr. Legris struck his forehead. "Why the deuce didn't I think of that before?" he exclaimed. "Come on quick."

But the driver was not disposed to take them any further. His stable, he said, was close at hand, and his poor beast had been on his legs all night. They lost more than an hour in looking for another cab, and fifteen minutes in hunting up a commissionaire who would take a note to Madame Delorge to explain her son's absence. Then, as they were worn out with fatigue and lack of food, they repaired to the Café Périclès, where Justus brought them a cup of chocolate. On entering they met the journalist, Peyrolas,

who was in the seventh heaven of delight, having published an article which would make a martyr of him, and send him to prison for a month.

It was not far from ten o'clock in the morning when Raymond and the doctor at last turned into the avenue leading to the cemetery. "We must be very cautious," said M. Legris, "and before we speak to the keeper we will look about a little."

They soon found that the precaution was a wise one, for hardly had they passed through the entrance gate than they saw a group of policemen and keepers talking together with extraordinary earnestness. "Look," said the doctor in an undertone, "something is going on evidently. Let us try and discover what it is. But take care——"

Assuming as far as they were able an air of indifference they slowly contrived to reach the outskirts of the group. An old keeper with a white beard had the floor for the time being. "I should have done just as my comrade did," he said. "How on earth could any one suspect such rascality? These men come in the middle of the night to the gate of the cemetery, they present a paper from the prefect which states that they are detectives, and are to be allowed to enter the cemetery at any hour. So of course they come in."

"But the permit was forged," said a police agent, impatiently.

"But how was my comrade to know that?"

"That is true, for the printed form must have been stolen from the office. Still the signatures and seals are all counterfeit, and so miserably imitated that any one ought to have seen it."

"You would have detected it, of course; but if a poor fellow is woken up at dead of night I hold him excusable for making a blunder."

To justify their presence near the group, Raymond and the doctor pretended to have much difficulty in lighting their cigars.

"But what did the fellows want?" continued a police-officer.

"Who can say?" answered another.

"All we can do now," whispered a third, "is to make a careful examination, and see if everything is in order."

"One thing is certain," continued the first speaker, "they can't escape. The police will be on their track at once, for the keeper remembers them perfectly. He declares he would recognise one of them anywhere. He was young, he says, and well dressed, with a full beard, parted in the middle. He was wrapped up in a very long overcoat, and wore a wide-brimmed hat and a white choaker."

The doctor grasped Raymond's arm, and drew him into the cemetery. The description he had heard corresponded with his own appearance, and indeed had any one of the group chanced to look round, Dr. Legris would have found himself in an awkward position. "This is a pretty state of things," he exclaimed, when they were out of hearing.

Raymond was quite in despair. "I shall never forgive myself," he said, "for the annoyance I have caused you. It seems to me that there is some fatality about me; for I injure the people I should most like to serve. I ought to live alone."

But the doctor's countenance was serene again. "If that be so," he answered, kindly, "you have all the more need of a friend with whose aid and devotion you can more firmly withstand mischance."

The words "friend" and "devotion" fell from his lips with all their admirable significance. But he was not fond of fine phrases, and detested effusive scenes; so, seeing that Raymond was sincerely touched, he added,

"But we will speak of this later on. At present we must attend to the matter in hand, which, it must be admitted, is becoming terribly complicated. We cannot now go to the keeper to question him—it would be the height of imprudence." He paused for a moment, and then resumed: "However, I do not yet give up the hope of finding a clue to the enigma. Let us try and discover the spot where we were at last night."

The cemetery was now divested of its nocturnal terrors. A haven of rest for the departed, it was, nevertheless, full of motion and life. People were constantly passing with flowers and wreaths of immortelles, while from a distance came the regular sound of pick-axes and the monotonous song of a gardener. Beside the paths the grass was growing green, the early spring flowers were blooming, and the bees were humming busily. As the two young men wandered through the labyrinth of tombs looking for the place they wished to find, the doctor suddenly exclaimed: "It has just occurred to me that if, as you say, the two Christian names on that tomb recall nothing to you, the family name, which must, of course, be inscribed on the register, might, perhaps, do so."

Raymond started. "But, doctor," he exclaimed, "we can't examine the register ourselves, now that we have learned that the permit was false."

"No; but we can send some one else——"

He paused, and, after looking round him, added: "This is the clump of cypress, I am sure, and the very spot where we stood."

He was right. They could see the tomb which had been so sacrilegiously profaned. It was just as they had left it—that is to say, surrounded by piles of mortar and refuse, with the workmen's tools still on the ground. At this sight the doctor frowned. He had hoped to find the repairs finished and the tomb entirely closed up again. Since the profanation could in no other way be securely concealed, he took it for granted that it would have been done. But no; the uneven stones, many of them half falling apart, at once told the story. Raymond realised this, too, for, in reply to his friend's exclamation of alarm, he said: "You heard what the keepers said—that they meant to inspect the cemetery at once."

"Yes, I heard them, and if they come here, as of course they will, these slabs in this disorder will at once attract their attention. They will begin an examination and discover that the coffin-lid has been forced open, and that the coffin itself is empty."

Raymond felt his brain reeling. "So that——" he stammered.

"So that if we are recognized we shall certainly be arrested, imprisoned, and accused of an odious and frightful crime. And we shall possibly be condemned to——"

"You appal me, doctor."

"Very possibly. But prove your innocence if you can. Tell the truth to any judge in the land. Tell him that, in compliance with an anonymous letter, you and I went to a ball at La Reine Blanche to meet an unknown man; that this man appeared in a carnival-costume, and that we followed him here; that he told us to conceal ourselves; that we saw four persons, one of whom the others called the duchess, pass over the wall, and then proceed to violate this tomb. Yes, tell this story to any judge. Why, he would laugh at you, and say you are mad; that no such thing could, by any possibility, happen in a civilized city like Paris." And without allowing Raymond to intervene, the doctor continued: "Besides, this is not everything. The authorities would ask if people usually erected tombs to receive empty coffins. We might repeat what we saw, but they would shrug their

shoulders, and finally turn on us and demand the body of this Marie Sidonie."

Dr. Legris actually turned pale as he spoke, so vivid did the danger appear, and overcome with unreasoning dread, he caught hold of Raymond's arm. "Let us go at once," he exclaimed.

As the doctor lost his self-possession, however, Raymond grew cooler and more composed. "Go!" he repeated. "How can we go? Do you forget that our description has been given? To hasten now—or even to appear to avoid observation—would be to denounce ourselves."

It was most extraordinary that they had not been noticed as they came in, for their appearance was singular enough. Their adventure of the night had left its traces on their weather-stained garments; their trousers were very soiled and muddy, like their hats, which after being covered with dust in the ball-room, had subsequently been drenched with rain. The doctor looked at himself, and then at his companion. "I am a little off my balance," he said, with a constrained smile; and yet you must admit that the most ordinary prudence requires that we should get out of this cemetery as speedily as possible. The longer we wait, the smaller will be the number of persons hanging about the gate, and the greater our danger will become. So let us arrange our clothes as well as possible, and then we will mingle in the first funeral procession that is going out, and hold our heads down as if we were absorbed in grief."

IV.

THE doctor's advice was followed, and a short time afterwards he and Raymond had passed in safety, but not without apprehension, through the dreaded portal of the cemetery. Once in the avenue they were safe; and yet they did not breathe freely until they reached the Café Périclès again. They ordered breakfast in a small room on the second floor—which Justus reserved for his most desirable customers—so as to be able to talk freely, and escape that terrible journalist, Peyrolas, who, lying in ambush behind the front door, insisted on reading his tremendous article to every new comer.

Under the influence of a juicy outlet and some good Bordeaux, Dr. Legris was soon himself again, and as he filled Raymond's glass, he said, "I think this will be a lesson to us. In future we had better keep as far from that cemetery as the limits of Paris will allow. This another instance of the danger a man incurs in wearing a white cravat!"

But Raymond would not smile. As long as he had anything to do, any steps to take in this mysterious matter he had kept up his courage and energy. Now, however, he was in a state of prostration and merely muttered in reply to his companion: "Yes;—we shall never find out anything—I see it plainly enough!"

Dr. Legris shrugged his shoulders and finished his breakfast in silence. When he had lighted his cigar, however, just as coffee was served, he said: "You are mistaken, my dear friend—I think you will very soon puzzle out this enigma."

Raymond shook his head, and the doctor opened the door to satisfy himself that Justus was not listening outside, in accordance with one of his pleasing habits, and then returning to the table, seated himself again opposite his new friend. "Now," he resumed, "let us reason together calmly, and try to set our bewildered ideas in order, for I am inclined to believe that we have behaved like children. You probably have certain reasons which I

know nothing about for being so much disturbed. But I, on the contrary, have been affected in the most extraordinary way, when you take into consideration that I am a physician and a sceptic." At this point Raymond tried to speak, but the doctor hastily continued, "The truth is, that we both of us allowed our imaginations to run away with us. But that's over. Now I ask, why should we at once conclude that we are incapable of elucidating this mystery? Listen to me a moment." Raymond sighed. "Let us proceed methodically," resumed the doctor—nothing daunted. "First of all it is clear that this affair was of sufficient importance to induce these people to incur the very great risks they did. Their motive is what we must discover. So far we only know one thing—that the interests of the two principal parties were identical. The man triumphed, and the woman was overwhelmed with joy, as if at the realization of her fondest hopes. To all appearance they simply wished to discover whether Marie Sidonie's grave was occupied or not."

Dr. Legris paused as if expecting some answer or remark, but as Raymond did not speak, he went on—"The organiser of this audacious enterprise—the well-dressed man, the gentleman of the party—unquestionably knew that the coffin was vacant. If you remember, he exclaimed, just as the lid was opened, 'You will now see, Madame la Duchesse, that I have not deceived you.' She had evidently doubted, for otherwise she would not have been so exceedingly joyful when she ascertained the truth with her own eyes."

This point seemed to be so clearly established that Raymond was roused from his apathy. "Such being the case," continued the doctor, "the conclusion we are forced to arrive at is that somewhere in this world there is a living, healthy woman—a woman who is supposed to be dead and buried—Marie Sidonie by name."

He spoke these words in a tone of such profound conviction that Raymond started. "Then," said he, "we must also believe in some odious piece of deception."

"Precisely."

"But for what reason? Why——"

"I wish I only knew!" cried the doctor. "But on this point we have no clue. One thing alone is clear, which is, that the duchess had everything to expect, everything to look for from the existence of this Marie Sidonie."

For a minute Raymond was silent. "But," said he, at last, "I cannot understand what interest I am supposed to have in this plot. Why should I be drawn into it?"

This was precisely what puzzled the doctor, and he could find no plausible reply to the question. "How can I divine the reason," he answered, "if you cannot? Still, it is clear that you would not have been summoned to witness this apparently incomprehensible scene, unless your presence had not been considered indispensable by these people."

"But who are they?"

"People who know you well—for the anonymous letter not only alluded to the death of General Delorge, your father, but also to a woman who loved you. It is clear, too, that the person who wrote it was quite sure of your compliance, for everything was in readiness—even to the forged document which opened the gate of the cemetery. Another proof that they considered your presence of the utmost importance is that they allowed you to take a friend with you—a friend who could have no especial reasons, such as you might have, to keep the secret—and refrain from disclosing the whole affair

to the police." Dr. Legris tossed aside his cigar, which had gone out while he talked, and continued his course of induction. "I infer, therefore," said he, "that the writer of the anonymous letter must be the man we saw—the man with the lady who was called the duchess."

"I agree with you," muttered Raymond.

"I am sure of it; for it was perfectly clear to me that he suspected our presence, or rather knew that we were there behind the clump of cypress."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have a proof which would satisfy the most incredulous jury. Recall when these two men in blouses came over the wall, and descended into the cemetery. What did they do?"

"As well as I can remember," answered Raymond, "they looked about and listened."

"To ascertain, in short, if there were any spies."

"Evidently."

"Then I am right. Now, don't you think that such rascals as these would have taken greater precautions and have been far more careful in their investigations if their employers had not previously said to them, 'Don't go near the cypress tree on your left, for I have placed people there who must not be disturbed?'"

"I see," muttered Raymond—"I see. Yes; I think that man was the writer of the letter."

The doctor was quite radiant; for, as a rule, it affords a man great pleasure to be able to display his peculiar order of talent. "Ah! that man," he suddenly cried, forgetting his oath not to ask a single question. "And who is he? Do you suspect any one?"

Raymond's face grew dark. "Doctor!" he said. But M. Legris calmly continued: "And this duchess, can you not give her a name?"

"I know several women who bear that title. The Duchesse de Maumussy, the Duchesse de Maillefert——"

"Then, perhaps——"

Raymond shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "This proves nothing," he exclaimed, "for it offers no possible clue to the reasons why I should have been involved in last night's occurrence. Do you doubt my word? Must I again assure you, on all I hold most sacred, that I am at an utter loss to understand the affair, and that I have never known any one by the name of Marie Sidonie?"

The young physician coloured. "Have I been indiscreet?" he asked. "Tell me frankly if you would like me to forget what has happened. Say the word, and I will never speak of it again to you."

But Raymond was already ashamed of his burst of irritation, and he caught hold of the doctor's hand. "Enough!" he cried, "there must be no half-way confidences with a friend like you. Come and dine with us this evening, and we will see if there is anything in my past life which can possibly explain last night's mystery."

Part III.

GENERAL DELORGE.

I.

ONE evening, in a rare moment of expansiveness, Raymond Delorge had said to Dr. Legris, "How wretched a man is when he has nothing to expect or hope! Here am I, not yet twenty, and if it were not that my death would kill my mother, I should long since have blown out my brains."

The story of this young man's life will explain his mournful despair. His father, General Pierre Delorge, had been what is called a "soldier of fortune"—that is to say, one of those military men who had no other recommendation than their merit and their bravery; no wealth save their swords, and each rise in whose promotion is the reward of some undoubted service or gallant act. The son of a cabinet-maker at Poitiers, who had served as a volunteer in 1792, Pierre Delorge, rocked in childhood to the music of the glorious legends of the armies of the First Republic, had, on his eighteenth birthday, entered a regiment of Dragoons. His education was very defective, but his mind was full of tales of battle, and he felt that he was of the same metal as those heroic soldiers whom his father so often talked about. Unfortunately, it was now the period of the Restoration—1820—and the sons of revolutionary artizans were by no means held in high esteem. For a long time Pierre Delorge had no opportunity of distinguishing himself, but he had determined to profit by the years of peace and the enforced leisure of garrison life to remedy the deficiencies of his education. That long hours which his companions spent in *cafés* over their punch bowls were by him employed in hard study; for he saved enough from his small pay to pay for teachers and to buy books. He was laughed at and called a recluse; he was ridiculed for his adherence to his duties, but he went on his way unheeding. He was a faithful friend, always ready to serve his comrades in an emergency; and his modesty and courage were such that they could not escape some recognition, even in these unfavourable times. The revolution of 1830 found him in Algeria, where he had risen to the rank of a lieutenant. After the fall of Algiers, where he behaved with great gallantry, he was decorated. He spent eight years in Northern Africa, and was present at all the more notable engagements. At Constantine he was wounded, and at Monzaia also. He received the Cross of the Legion of Honour on the battlefield, and after a second and third promotion, he returned to France with his regiment in 1839. He was then thirty-seven years of age, and was allotted garrison duties at Vendôme, where, in consequence of the reputation which had preceded him, and the curiosity he aroused, he was presented to the ruling power of the town—Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau. This lady, who was some fifty years of age, had never married. She was thin and yellow, with a hooked nose like the beak of a bird of prey. She was as noble as she was proud, devoted to cards, and credited with being a great gossip. However, when any one at Vendôme touched ever so lightly on her faults, the reply was sure to be made: "Very true, no doubt; but then she is so good and so very generous!"

Now, she enjoyed this great reputation of generosity and goodness merely because she had for ten years supported under her roof the daughter of her deceased sister, Madame Elizabeth de Lespéran, and yet this was neither a spontaneous nor a voluntary act on the old lady's part. When the Marquis de Lespéran died, just a year after his wife, leaving no son behind him, Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau did her best to compel the rich Lespérans, of Montoire, to take charge of the girl. But these good, generous relatives were not disposed to embarrass themselves with their brother's daughter. One of the ladies of the family actually said: "The old witch had better keep the child!" and mademoiselle did keep her. "Poor as I am," she exclaimed, "I will keep her if it were only to make these people blush for their own meanness."

She kept Elizabeth—and at what a cost to the poor child!—for the old lady, disappointed and vindictive, made her niece's life a constant torture. Elizabeth never tried on a new dress without undergoing the most humiliating reproofs and hearing a long lecture on the coquetry of simpletons who think themselves pretty, interspersed with groans anent the excessive dearness of stuffs, and the extortions of dressmakers. The girl never put on a new pair of boots without hearing her aunt say to a friend, "That child would wear out iron itself. Roulleau, the shoe-maker in the Grande-Rue, finds her his best customer. And yet she ought to have some idea of the sacrifices I am daily making for her."

The situation would, no doubt, have been even worse but for a relative who came to see Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau occasionally, and of whom she stood in more terror than of her confessor. This was the old Baron de Glorière, a bachelor and a collector of articles of *virtu*, who had conceived a warm affection for Elizabeth. It was to him she owed the only doll she ever had—a doll to whom she confided all her childish woes, and it was he who, as she grew up, gave her an occasional pretty toilette and some little jewellery. He was not rich, merely possessing an income of a few thousand francs, with his Château de Glorière, where he resided. This château, it was said, contained many objects of great value—pictures, furniture, and bronzes; but the old collector would have died of hunger rather than have sold the tiniest article among them. "Don't be so severe with your niece," he kept saying to Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau, and perhaps, she would have obeyed him had Elizabeth been less pretty. But the girl's brilliant beauty filled her with rage, and she did her best to hide it. Elizabeth's shapely figure was clad in plain, ill-fitting garments, but she could not conceal its grace. Her hair was superb, and her pretty little hands, in spite of the rough duties they were condemned to, were still delicate and white. Even the exquisite shape of her foot could be detected, despite the clumsy shoes she wore. "Any other girl would certainly have the small-pox!" grumbled the old lady, as she looked at her niece discontentedly; and in fact, she would have been delighted if this ailment had disfigured the poor child for life.

It was at one of this charitable relative's soirées, enlivened by stale cake and gooseberry syrup, that Elizabeth de Lespéran appeared for the first time to Pierre Delorge. The word "appeared" is advisedly used, for he was, as by a celestial vision, fascinated and entranced. Then he was struck by the poor orphan's modest grace, by her sweetness of disposition, and by the dignity with which she endured her aunt's ill treatment. His heart ached at the manner in which the habitués of the house spoke to her, and it was touched by the reserved and almost haughty air she adopted. When he left Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau's house on the night we speak of, instead of

returning home, he strolled along the banks of the Loire until it was midnight, although he knew he must be in the saddle at five o'clock in the morning. He felt the need of reflection, for a new idea had just entered his brain, and that was the idea of marriage. "Why should I not marry? My rank and my pay justify me in doing so. I can already keep up a modest establishment, and I have six thousand francs in hand to start with, while my pay will now go on increasing."

When at last he returned to his quarters, he for the first time in his life, perhaps, studied his mirror, and wondered what effect he produced on people who saw him for the first time. He was tall, well built, and had acquired just that degree of embonpoint which is becoming. His dark hair was brushed back from his bronzed brow. The honesty and loyalty of his nature could be read in his eyes; his moustache veiled without concealing his firmly cut lips. He gazed at the mirror, and did not think himself altogether ill-looking, still he did not wish to incur the risk of a great disappointment, and so, before aught else, he made some curious inquiries. He had no difficulty in ascertaining the exact position of Elizabeth de Lespéran. "Not having a sou," said some one, "she will die an old maid just like her aunt."

The officer was delighted with this news, and he became a constant visitor at Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau's house, although the entertainments there were not of the most festive description, for the guests were mostly fanatical unmarried ladies of high birth, with an invalid or two, and several priests. But Commandant Delorge did not feel that he was paying too dearly for the innumerable games of Boston he was compelled to play, for they gave him an opportunity to contemplate Elizabeth at his ease, and he occasionally found means of conversing with her, though he did not dare to touch on the subject which was never out of his mind. At last, however, he began to think, from the fleeting colour which came to the girl's cheeks whenever he called at the house, and from the fact that a certain shutter was gently moved whenever he passed by on horseback, that she was not unkindly disposed towards him. He was indeed now only waiting for some favourable occasion to declare himself, when, towards the end of February, he fancied that Elizabeth was losing her beautiful complexion, and that dark circles were gathering under her big blue eyes. He did not rest until he had discovered the reason of this change. The fact is, a new notion had taken possession of Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau, who, on the pretence that she could not sleep, now insisted on her niece reading to her the greater part of the night. In the morning the old lady pulled up her eider-down quilt and slept till noon, but poor Elizabeth was obliged to rise as early as the servants. Thus she did not obtain more than three or four hours' sleep of a night.

When Pierre Delorge heard this, he burst into such a rage that his orderly fled in fear from the room. "This must stop," muttered the commandant, "for otherwise the old woman would kill her."

Accordingly on the next day, it was a lovely afternoon, the young officer presented himself before Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau, and, without any preamble, abruptly exclaimed: "Mademoiselle, I have the honour to ask you for the hand of your niece, Mademoiselle Elizabeth de Lespéran." And thereupon, without waiting for a reply, he gave the old lady an account of his means, his origin, and hopes for the future.

Intensely surprised, Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau examined him as if he had been a natural curiosity. "But," said she, "the child has not a sou—no dowry whatever."

Without being in the least disconcerted, the commandant replied, that this made no difference to him, and that he was aware of it, besides. The old lady was more amazed than ever, but she terminated the interview by declaring, that she must have sometime for decision.

The fact is, that she was utterly upset at the idea of losing Elizabeth. What would become of her if this submissive slave were freed from her tyranny—if this resigned victim were stolen from her? Who would take care of her if she fell ill? Who would mend her lace and help in making her dresses? Why this niece of hers was worth three servants. “No, this marriage shall never take place,” she exclaimed, as soon as Commandant Delorge had gone off; and she at once turned her mind to thinking of some good reason of withholding her consent.

She soon found one. What! Could the son of a Poitiers artisan, a mere soldier of fortune, marry the daughter of the noble Marquis de Lespéran? “Never!” she cried. “Never.” It is simply preposterous! My sister would rise from her tomb at the very thought!

Unfortunately for Mademoiselle de la Rochecorbeau, her feelings were not shared by her niece, who, when she saw the commandant arrive, in full uniform, at so unusual an hour, was gifted with a perception of the truth. Without an instant's delay, or stopping to discuss the impropriety of an act which she would have unhesitatingly condemned an hour before, she darted like lightning into a small room connected with the *salon*, whence she could hear all that was said by the commandant and her aunt. So great was her agitation that she was very nearly caught by Pierre, but she retreated in season and repaired to her room, locking herself inside. “What will my aunt say?” she asked herself, over and over again. “When will she give her answer, and what will it be?” Alas! Elizabeth knew her aunt too well to doubt her decision. “She will reject him!” she cried in an agonizing voice. “He will think himself disdained, and I shall never see him again. What shall I do?”

She reflected for a moment, and inspiration coming to her, she wrote this laconic note to Monsieur de Glorière:—“My Dear Good Friend,—You will render an immense service to your little friend if you will call here at once, this very day—as if by chance—to see my aunt. I can safely leave everything else to your prudence and discretion.

“ELIZABETH.”

However, it was one thing to write this note, and another to send it. The difficulty was to have it immediately taken to the Château de Glorière, which was a full league distant from Vendôme. However, with an audacity that surprised herself, Elizabeth sent her aunt's one servant to fetch a boy in the neighbourhood who occasionally did errands for the house. He soon appeared. “Do you know where the Baron de Glorière lives?” she eagerly asked him.

“Oh, yes,” answered the lad.

“He must have this letter within an hour. Mind you only give it to him. Now, hurry!” And to impart strength to the boy's legs, she placed in his hand a silver piece, all she possessed in the world. “Heaven grant,” she said to herself, “that Monsieur de Glorière may be at home.”

And he was at home. Wrapped in his large-flowered dressing gown, the old collector was engaged in dusting his rare pictures and idolized china when Elizabeth's letter reached him. He read it at a glance.

“Ah!” he muttered, “prudence and discretion! What does that mean?” However, as soon as the lad had gone, he hurriedly dressed himself, deter-

mined to repair with all possible speed to Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau's house, "for it is very evident," he said, "that something strange has happened. What can this disagreeable old maid intend to do to my poor Elizabeth?"

The disagreeable old maid was by no means pleased when, some four hours or so after Commandant Delorge's departure, she saw the Baron de Glorière enter her drawing-room. However, he shewed himself very amiable, and hid his anxiety under the frankest smiles. For a moment she thought of saying nothing about the request for her niece's hand; but on reflection she decided that it would not do to hide the secret from the most influential member of the family, so she told the story slowly and reluctantly.

As soon as the baron understood what she meant, he interrupted her, exclaiming: "God is good! I never dared hope that our little niece would have such luck as this."

"Luck! Why, the man is the son of a common mechanic."

"Who cares what his father was? The son himself is a gallant soldier, and has a noble heart."

With an air of great dignity, Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau undertook to express *her* opinion to the baron. But it was loss of time. "I fancy," he rejoined, "that if you were twenty years younger, and if this handsome soldier had come for you instead of for Elizabeth, you would not look upon him as so audacious!" The old lady choked down the angry rejoinder which half rose to her lips. "As for myself," continued the baron, "I am going to tell this gallant gentleman what I think of the matter." And, disregarding the old lady's expostulations, he took his leave.

By a wonderful chance, just as Monsieur de Glorière left the drawing-room, Elizabeth was passing through the hall. He took her by the hand, and in a tone of indulgent raillery, exclaimed: "Ah! Ah! Miss Cunning! so you like the gallant soldier. Well, well, there is no need of blushing so furiously; you can rely on me!" And, so saying, he went off.

As he passed through the street he talked steadily to himself. "This good Demoiselle de la Rochecordeau is becoming absolutely unendurable. How can she have been so blind! Did she suppose that the mere charm of her soirées attracted this soldier to her house?"

Meanwhile Pierre Delorge was by no means in a comfortable state of mind. He knew something about what Elizabeth had to endure from her aunt, and he naturally anticipated difficulties. As he saw the Baron de Glorière enter his modest rooms, he grew very pale. "Well," he hastily exclaimed, without a preliminary good-morning.

"Well," answered the baron, "I have come to tell you that Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau does not seem inclined to give you her fair niece's hand."

The poor commandant turned pale.

"But I also wished to say that you need not despair. The old lady is not the sole mistress of the situation. The family have a voice in the matter, and as I claim to be one of the council, you may count on me."

Pierre Delorge began to express his earnest thanks, but the baron quickly put a stop to them. "You may thank me coming out of church," said he. "In the meantime, we must keep our eyes open, for the old lady is very shrewd. We will, therefore, go out for a walk together, and then you will dine with me at the hotel. After dinner you must take me with you to the officers' club, and I will play a game of checkers with your colonel, who, I hear, plays wonderfully well. Now, as I am a near relative of Mademoiselle de Lespéran, and as we have never been seen together before, the good

gossips of this town will at once scent something new, and infer that you are going to marry her. Public opinion will be with us, and that is a great point in a place like this, and has effected a good many marriages already."

The baron's programme was fully carried out with precisely the results he had anticipated. Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau was still in bed on the following day, when one of her especial cronies arrived with the news that every one was talking of the approaching marriage of Mademoiselle de Lespéran and Commandant Delorge.

The old lady half choked with anger. "It is the blackest of treasons," she cried—"an act unworthy of a gentleman! I shall have an explanation with him, and I shall tell him precisely what I think."

However, she did not do so, for she began to realize that such a step would be the height of folly. Still, as she was not a woman to give up a point gracefully, she betook herself to solicitude, so as to think of some means of getting out of the difficulty. Why should she not take Elizabeth away? She and her niece might establish themselves at some watering-place until Pierre Delorge's regiment had left Vendôme. Such a plan would cost a great deal of money, no doubt, for expenses are heavy at watering-places; but the sacrifice seemed light to her compared to the thought of her loneliness should she lose Elizabeth. She smiled at the idea of the Baron de Glorière's discomfiture when he called upon her. He would be told that she and her niece were travelling, and would be absent for several months! It was a delightful dream, no doubt, but too fine a one to be realized, as the old lady soon discovered. The very next day she sent for her niece and told her to begin packing for a long journey, for they would leave Vendôme that very evening. But an extraordinary thing now occurred. The girl looked at her aunt and respectfully replied: "Excuse me, but I cannot leave Vendôme just now."

The old lady felt as if she were losing her senses. "You cannot leave Vendôme!" she stammered; "and why, if you please?"

"You know as well as I do, aunt,"

"Explain yourself, if you please."

"Well, I wish to know what answer you intend giving to a request which was made of you yesterday, and which you promised to reply to."

"If Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau had seen one of the statues of the town church descend from its niche, she would not have been more astonished. How did her niece know anything about it? and how, knowing it, did she dare to confess her knowledge? "It is the height of impudence!" she exclaimed. "But at all events, Mademoiselle, if you wish to know my reply, hear it: I say, distinctly, that never, while I live, shall a niece of mine marry this low-born cur! Is that clear enough? Are you quite satisfied with my reply? and will you have the goodness to attend to our trunks with all possible speed?"

In vain, however, did the old lady try to re-assert her empire over Elizabeth; the girl's will, once as flexible as a willow wand, had suddenly become as hard as steel. Pale, with sparkling eyes, she began to speak "Forgive me, aunt; but——"

"But what?"

"Your decision is too hasty. You have not consulted any one. I am an orphan, and have a right to appeal to a family council!"

"A family council, indeed!" cried the old lady in such a rage that her very lips were white. "I should only be doing my duty if I took you by the arm and put you out of doors—if I drove you from under my roof!"

Her rage was so intense that Heaven only knows what she would have done if the baron had not just then appeared upon the scene. His unexpected presence seemed to have the same effect upon her as a cold shower-bath. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "you have come to gloat over your work, have you?"

He had just come from making a round of visits. He had seen every member of the family, and had brought from each of them a formal consent, in writing, to Mademoiselle de Lespéran's marriage with Commandant Delorge. "I know," said the baron, "that what I have done is a little irregular; but, if you prefer it, I can summon a family council in due form."

"It is quite unnecessary," muttered Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau; and, as she dropped on to a chair, tears of rage rolled down her hollow cheeks.

So great seemed her grief that Elizabeth began to regret her firmness. All the humiliations which she had undergone for twelve long years were effaced. She only remembered the hospitality she had received. The old lady had the game in her hands at that moment. With one word, with one hypocritical caress, she could have riveted the chains anew, and have indefinitely retarded the marriage. But as the young girl, much moved, hurried towards her, she angrily exclaimed: "Leave me—leave me! You triumph to-day, but your joy will not last. God punishes ingratitude, and He will punish you through your husband. May you be as miserable as you deserve to be! As for the little I have to leave behind me, you may now say farewell to it, for not a halfpenny will you ever see." Then, turning to the baron, she continued: "Elizabeth's relatives have, of course, the right to give their consent to her marriage, but I do not think they can impose the objectionable society of this man Delorge upon me in my own house. I shall, therefore, be infinitely obliged if you will point out to me the speediest possible means of ridding myself of this refractory niece of mine."

The baron coldly bowed. "I foresaw this question," he said, "and I have made all necessary arrangements."

It was, indeed, at Glorière that the lovers saw each other during the few weeks which now elapsed prior to their marriage. What weeks these were, and how dear the memory of them proved throughout their lives! How often did the commandant live these days over again. He remembered how fast he rode after morning parade, how he espied a white shadow afar off among the trees, how, leaping from his horse, he offered his arm to Elizabeth, and then how lingeringly they walked up the shady avenue to the house, from the open doors of which came the sound of a cheery voice exclaiming: "Make haste, little ones. My poor François has announced breakfast three times already."

It was the baron who spoke, and coming out on to the steps he cordially shook hands with the commandant, and led the way to the dining-room, a lofty apartment, surrounded with dressers and buffets, decked out with specimens of every kind of *faïence* and porcelain, purchased piece by piece by the indefatigable collector. After their meal the lovers wandered over the grounds of Glorière—a simple home, but embowered among superb trees, with magnificent mossy rocks and sloping banks near at hand, and a lovely view of the river. The baron usually excused himself on the pretence that he had something to do with his collection, and the lovers sat in some shady corner and talked of the happy future before them. What had they to fear

now? Nothing whatever. Fate smiled upon them, and they had but little ambition—little care for worldly honours, fashion, and wealth. Still, at times a cloud settled over Elizabeth's face, and Pierre would say to her tenderly, "You are thinking of your aunt?"

He was right; for it was not without bitter tears that Elizabeth de Lespéran had bidden the dreary house at Vendôme, where she had been so unhappy, good-bye; and she felt a certain vague and unreasoning self-reproach for having left it. Her aunt's last words were by no means cheerful ones—"May you be as miserable as you deserve to be," and they haunted her like a terrible dream, and awakened a vague apprehension, which was like a spot on her sun—a shadow on her happiness. "What wouldn't I give," she said to Pierre, "if my aunt would only be reconciled to us and come to our wedding."

"Unfortunately, my love," urged the commandant, "she has prevented us from holding out the olive branch by accusing us of manœuvring for her fortune. Believe me, we have nothing to do but forget her, as, on her side, she has probably forgotten us ere now."

But in this idea he was mistaken, for the old lady was busy thinking of her niece, and if she gave no sign of life, it was merely because she had not yet lost all hope of revenge. She had ascertained that a clause of the army regulations forbids an officer to marry unless his bride brings him a marriage portion of twenty thousand francs. "Now," said Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau to herself, "where can these two lovers pick up twenty thousand francs? Elizabeth hasn't a sou, and the commandant has merely six thousand francs, which will not more than suffice for the *trousseau*, the *corbeille*, and the wedding."

However, the old maid was again mistaken. Delorge was not the man to start on an enterprise without foreseeing all its consequences, and, knowing Elizabeth's poverty, he had taken all needful precautions. His father, after fifty years of hard toil, had acquired a small estate near Poitiers, which he let for four hundred crowns a year, and which was valued at sixty thousand francs. Accordingly, Pierre wrote thus frankly to his father: "I love a young girl who is an orphan, and poor. The only obstacle to our marriage is that she does not possess the dowry which is required of an officer's wife—twenty thousand francs. Are you willing to give her the title deeds of your estate? You will understand that it is a mere formality, and will in no way diminish your income from Les Moulineaux."

To this application the old cabinet-maker at once replied: "Why do you ask me the question? Les Moulineaux belongs to you quite as much as to me, and you are at liberty to do precisely as you choose with it. You know that I am very well off, for every year I save more than a third of my income. Embrace your bride for me, and tell her that I shall send her a pair of diamond ear-rings worthy of the wife of an officer of your position."

And so thus the marriage of Pierre Delorge and Elizabeth de Lespéran was solemnised one sunny day in May, 1840. The previous evening Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau had taken to her bed.

"I have lost all hope," she said to one of her friends. "I know Elizabeth. Her husband will beat her, and she will be wretchedly unhappy."

II.

POOR old maid! She was again mistaken, for the commandant did not beat his wife. From the day of their marriage they enjoyed in all its fulness the intense happiness they had dreamed of under the trees at La Glorière. Outside annoyances connected with Delorge's profession had lost their power to vex him for any length of time; and when, contrary to his expectations and the rules of the service, his regiment was changed twice in one year, from garrison to garrison, his wife on her side gaily exclaimed: "It doesn't matter as long as we can be together!" And at those times she would smile and sigh as she murmured: "I am glad of those worries, for we are so happy that I am sometimes absolutely frightened."

And this was true enough; for Madame Delorge was haunted by vague apprehensions, particularly during the earlier months of her married life. In vain did her husband laugh at her. She had suffered too much as Elizabeth de Lespéran to be quickly reassured by the happiness she enjoyed as Pierre's wife. Often, when she was alone, she compared her past with her present, and at the memory of certain privations she had endured and the humiliations which had been inflicted upon her, the tears rushed to her eyes, and she sobbed bitterly. One day her husband abruptly entered the room, and was dismayed at the pitiful sight. "What is the matter?" he cried.

But the sight of him—his very voice—at once brought back her smiles again, and throwing her arms round his neck, she answered: "Nothing, dear. I am foolish and very happy."

By degrees, as she realised that the past was indeed the past, her nerves relaxed, and she grew calm and content. As a woman she kept all the promises of her girlhood, and was generally beloved, even in the regiment, where not a voice was raised in criticism of her conduct. This was singular and unusual, inasmuch as a regiment is simply a perambulating village, with a flagstaff instead of a steeple, full of gossip and curiosity, and dragging with its baggage through France all the petty feminine jealousies and spites which, taken up by husbands and brothers, become good solid hates. The happiness of the commandant and his wife became complete when God sent them a son, whom they named after the good friend they had not forgotten, the Baron de Glorière. He consented to leave his treasures and inspect the new arrival, and was rewarded for his compliance by discovering quite a mine of curiosities at Pontivy, where the regiment was stationed at the time of the boy's birth. The baron brought some news of Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau, who was daily becoming more and more of a devotee, and changed her servant twice a week, for her increasing religious fervour did not at all seem to have improved her temper, though, on the other hand, her health had never been better. "You will see," said the baron, "she will end by burying us all."

The old gentleman went home again with evident reluctance, and made the commandant and his wife swear that they would come every summer and spend at least a fortnight with him at Glorière. "If you do not come for your own sake, or for mine," he said, "come at least for my godson's health—he'll grow up like grass in the country air!"

On the night of their old friend's departure, the Delorges seemed to find their house very empty. How much more so would it have been the case had they known it was the last time they should ever see him! And yet it was so; for only two months later, while standing on some steps dusting a

picture, he overbalanced himself and fell to the ground. When François, his faithful valet, reached him, he had ceased to breathe. "It is an avenging Providence!" sighed Mademoiselle de la Rochecordeau, piously, on hearing of the baron's sudden death. "God grant peace to his soul! There's one rascal less in the world!"

This rascal, as it happened, left a will which appointed Madame Pierre Delorge, *nee* Elizabeth de Lespéran, his sole legatee, and with it there was a letter addressed to the commandant and his wife. "My mind will be at rest, my dear children," wrote the baron, "when I have arranged all my worldly affairs. I am growing old, and no one knows what may happen at any time. My sight and my judgment are alike weakened, for I actually bought a wretched copy the other day for a genuine Breughel de Velours. As I love you better than aught else in the world, I bequeath to you all I possess. First, my little income from well invested funds—three thousand two hundred francs. My Château de Glorière, as it stands and with all it contains. Do not thank me for it. I know that you will always prize the spot where under the old elms you two learned to love each other. You would never allow Glorière to pass into strangers' hands. If it entered the market, I am sure that fat old silk mercer in the Rue de l'Hôpital would buy it, and then his giggling daughter would drive away my ghost. My collections are very dear to me. They have been the charm and occupation of my life, and yet I wish to sell them. The wandering life you lead would prevent you from having them with you; and if they were left at the château under the care of François—faithful as he is—they would come to grief. I have, however, selected and numbered—as you will see in my will—some sixty pieces, the most valuable in my collection—pictures and bronzes— which I beg you to retain. They will, of course, be cumbersome in moving from place to place, but they will impart a home-like cultivated look to the apartments you may occupy. As for the rest, sell them with as little delay as possible, and if you honour my memory, at the highest possible price. No one must ever say that my collection was a two-and-sixpenny affair. If you take my advice, you will have the sale at Tours, where my collection is already known, and where at least twenty amateurs reside. Have the sale bills well posted at Blois, Orleans, and Le Mans, and spare no expense in newspaper advertising. Is this all I have to say? Yes. Then, dear children, farewell. Talk to little Raymond sometimes of your old and most affectionate friend,

"RAYMOND D'ARCES,
"Baron de Glorière.

"P.S.—I wish that my faithful servant François may spend the rest of his days at Glorière, with an annuity of four hundred francs."

Commandant Delorge's eyes were full of tears when he finished reading this feeling letter. "This is the first sorrow we have known since our marriage," he said to his sobbing wife, who was leaning over his shoulder. "And it is a great one, for such a friend can never be replaced."

After considerable perplexity and a long consultation, the commandant applied for a fortnight's leave, and started for Vendôme to carry out the baron's wishes. Brief as the interval was, he found that the baron was nearly forgotten. But people woke up once more when one morning they found the walls covered with huge placards, on which appeared the following announcement in huge letters:—"GREAT AUCTION SALE of *Antique Furniture—Valuable Pictures—Engravings—Bronzes—Faïences—Tapestries, Arms and Books*, comprising the collection of the late BARON DE GLORIÈRE."

The mere idea of this sale, which was announced to take place at the end of the month at Tours, made all the people of Vendôme laugh aloud. "So it seems, then," said one of them, "that this eccentric old man's heirs seriously believe that he amassed some valuable things at Glorière!" And others, shaking their heads, answered: "They will find themselves much mistaken, then, for the things won't fetch a thousand crowns. But they ought to have been sold here. The expense of advertising and removal will be enormous and absorb all the proceeds!"

But this was not the commandant's opinion; he had been often struck by the beauty of certain objects in the collection, though he was nothing of a connoisseur, and he also had too much confidence in the baron's intelligence and shrewdness to believe that he could have so strangely overrated the value of his treasures. However, the interest he took in the sale, and the care with which he managed its details, were really not so much prompted by personal motives as by respect for the memory of his old friend. "The more they sell for," he said, "the greater will be the stupefaction of these simpletons, who now look upon the baron as a half-witted lunatic!"

The commandant's only mistake was that he expressed these sentiments before persons who did not understand them, and who, as soon as he had turned his back exclaimed to each other, "What nonsense! Does this man fancy he fooled us with all this display of disinterestedness. He thinks us too simple by half!"

In the meantime, all the objects appointed by the baron had been carefully put aside, with at least a hundred more, selected from among the tapestries, pictures, and weapons. The remainder on being offered for sale cleared one hundred and twenty-three thousand five hundred francs. "And observe, commandant," said the expert who had come down from Paris, "observe that you have taken out the cream of the collection. The things you retain are worth more than all those we have sold. I am myself ready to give you this moment thirty thousand francs for four of your pictures at my choice."

The fabulous result of the sale caused a profound sensation at Vendôme. The persons who had most ridiculed the baron's mania were thunderstruck. "By Jove!" they muttered, "it is not such a bad thing as it seems to pick up old curiosities!" And from that day forth Monsieur Pigorin, the fat silk mercer, adopted the habit of calling every afternoon at the second-hand shops in the town, hoping to pick up some of these wonders which lucky people buy for ten sous, and sell again for as many thousand francs. Made-moiselle de la Roche-cordeau had taken to her bed, as she always did when especially annoyed. "Who would ever have fancied that the eccentric old animal at Glorière possessed a fortune!" she muttered. "My niece found it out, it seems! Trust her for that. Well, well! They thoroughly fooled the old man, and now they have their reward! How they must laugh!"

The commandant did not laugh, however, but felt sincerely grateful to the good old man who, after insuring the happiness of his life, had also endowed him with that blessed sense of security for the future. "If I die on the field of battle now," he said to himself, "or by an accident, my last moments will not be embittered by the thought that I leave my wife and child without bread."

Thus it was with pious tenderness that Madame Delorge and her husband hung up the pictures and arranged the bronzes and china bequeathed to them by their old friend. Their furnished rooms at Pontivy at once became not only home like, but as one of the officers said, they acquired by

the magnificence of these art treasures almost a regal aspect. However, in spite of the generally credited report, that Madame Delorge had inherited the fortune of a millionaire uncle, the household went on in the same way—and a very modest way it was; for two servants were all they kept, with occasional assistance from the commandant's orderly, an old Alsatian named Krauss, who had been with his master for four and twenty years, and proudly boasted that in all that time he had not been away from him during four and twenty hours. He was now quite as devoted to Madame Delorge as to her husband, and had constituted himself Raymond's guardian, watching over him with a mother's attention, a lover's jealousy, and the faithful submission of a hound. However, this did not quite please the commandant. "It will never do," he said at times. "Krauss will ruin our boy, and make him insupportably selfish."

The boy was a year old when his father was made a lieutenant-colonel, for those were the days when wealth was a claim to advancement; and Lieutenant-Colonel Delorge, who was said to enjoy an income of twenty thousand livres, was soon promoted to a full colonelcy, and ordered to assume command of a regiment at Oran, in Algeria. This order marred the pleasure with which he received the congratulations of his friends. Should he take his wife and child with him, and expose them to the fatigues of such a voyage, and then to the perils of such a climate? But at the first word of objection he uttered, Madame Delorge checked him. "I knew what I was doing when I married you," she quietly said. "I am a soldier's wife. Wherever my husband goes, I go too!"

Accordingly they departed together, and three weeks afterwards, such speed had they made, they were located in one of those charming houses with shady gardens extending in terraces above the ravine of Santa-Cruz. The colonel at once learned why he had been ordered to set out with all possible despatch. The colony was in commotion. Algeria and Morocco were in a state of insurrection. In fact a formidable rising was projected, with the view of throwing all the French into the sea, and re-establishing the former Mahomedan rule.

The son of the Emperor of Morocco was at the head of the enterprise, and had massed his troops on the banks of the river Isly, feeling so sure of victory that he had already selected the officers who should command in his name at Oran and Mascara. He did not take into consideration the fact that Marshal Bugeaud commanded the French forces, and preferred offensive to defensive tactics. Thus, Colonel Delorge had scarcely established himself at Oran when he received orders to move forward with his regiment.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when the order reached the colonel, and he at once turned to his young wife. "The regiment marches at midnight," he said as gaily as possible.

He expected tears and a despairing scene, but he was mistaken. Elizabeth grew very pale; a strange, fixed look came into her eyes, but she simply answered: "Very well." And then, without another word, she busied herself in preparing such things as her husband required. She forgot nothing, not even a bundle of bandages and some lint. More moved by her self-possession than he would have been by her tears, the colonel tried to comfort her. "Why do you attend to these things?" he said. "Krauss knows all about them." But she was not to be turned from her purpose.

The twenty thousand inhabitants of Oran were all in the streets that night, and wild shouts saluted the regiment as it left the town, with banners flying and trumpets sounding. Madame Delorge had not given way;

crushing down her choking emotion, and forcing a smile to her lips, she had embraced her husband once more as he put his foot in the stirrup, and then, holding up her boy, she said: "Kiss your father and say to him, 'Come back soon.'"

"Come back soon," stammered the child. Then came a final embrace, and the Colonel rode away.

Elizabeth watched until her husband was out of sight, and then, on turning to go into the house again, she fell unconscious on the ground.

"Don't be anxious," Pierre had said to her, "we shall be back by the end of the month." And he was right, for Marshal Bugeaud gained the battle of Isly a week later, with ten thousand men against thirty thousand. Colonel Delorge had two horses killed under him, and his garments were in shreds, having been literally torn to shreds by yataghans, though he himself escaped with only one wound in the right arm.

"I was sure you would come back to me," said his wife, when the regiment returned to Oran; "for if you had been killed I should have felt it here," and she pressed her hand to her heart.

The Colonel's wound was long in healing, for the fatigue of forced marches, and the excessive heat, had greatly aggravated it; and even when it was healed, there was an annoying stiffness about Pierre's arm which rendered certain movements almost impossible. As a reward for his gallantry, and in compensation for his wound, he was invested with important functions, which gave him an opportunity of displaying his excellent administrative abilities. It was to him that the Minister of War alluded when, in 1847, he said, in the Chamber of Deputies: "With officers like that, I would undertake to colonize Algeria in ten years!"

Thus, Colonel Delorge's reputation, both as soldier and administrator, was well established when the revolution of 1848 took place; and he thanked destiny for keeping him far from Paris when civil war was causing rivers of blood to flow. It was about this time that his wife gave birth to a girl, who received the name of Pauline. Madame Delorge was now perfectly happy—all her vague apprehensions had left her—her husband and her two children occupied all her thoughts. Poor woman! She should have remembered that fate is a pitiless creditor, and insists upon full payment.

III.

It was the end of March, 1849, and Prince Louis Napoléon Bonaparte was President of the Republic, when the military circles of Oran began to talk about three civilians who had just arrived from Paris and taken rooms at the Hôtel de la Paix. One of them was a young man of prepossessing air and manner, wearing a full beard, and calling himself the Vicomte de Maumussy. The second was older. His moustache was very long, and waxed to an appalling degree. He registered his name as Victor de Combelaïne. Both of these two gentlemen were decorated with the Legion of Honour. The third was a more humble individual, and also more difficult to estimate. He was stout and short, very ruddy and very bald. The extreme loudness of his appearance was increased by a huge gold chain and numerous rings on his fingers. Although he did not seem particularly old, his companions called him Father Coutanceau. The party had come to Africa, they declared, to obtain certain grants of land and inaugurate an agricultural enterprise. This may have been the case, but their conduct was

not consistent with the idea; for they paid little heed to the colonists, and devoted all their time and attention to the military men. And often at nightfall officers from distant parts were seen entering the rooms occupied by the strangers with a thousand precautions against being noticed; while, on the other hand, the mysterious trio were always driving and riding about, and even spending a day or two at a time with some of the officers in their quarters. They seemed, too, to have plenty of money—for they lived well, and drank the best Bordeaux and champagne.

"I am annoyed by these men," said Commandant Delorge to his wife one night. "One would think they were recruiting agents; but who can they recruit in this colony."

"Why do you not institute some inquiries," said his wife.

Inquiries were indeed made, and it was finally ascertained that Maumussey's name was really Chingrot, and that no one knew whence he derived his title of viscount. He was one of those individuals who hang on to young men of wealthy parentage, the young bloods who dissipate their fortunes before they have them. The culminating features in Monsieur Chingrot de Maumussey's career had been an elopement with an unfortunate woman whom he had ruined, a duel, and a spell of extraordinary luck at baccarat. After this he had steadily gone down hill, though he made certain spasmodic efforts to rise again, trying well-nigh every path in life—journalism, trade, politics, and stocks, for there were no limits either to his conceit or his ambition. It was true, moreover, that he was by no means deficient in intelligence, wit, and *savoir-faire*. He talked agreeably and fluently, with all the cool audacity of a man who has nothing more to lose. Accused of being always lucky at cards, and threatened by creditors, not with the debtor's prison, but with the House of Correction; blackballed at all the clubs, and turned out of the Bourse, Monsieur de Maumussey had suddenly disappeared from the boulevards in the month of February, 1848, since when his existence had been an enigma. Not less disreputable had been the life of his companion, Monsieur Victor de Combelaïne, on a lower rung of the social ladder—lower, because no one knew who he was, whence he came, nor even what was this gentleman's birthplace. No one, in fact, had ever heard of Monsieur de Combelaïne, his father. His mother, it was said, was a noble Hungarian lady. The only thing certain was that De Combelaïne had been a soldier, for he was known to have belonged to a regiment of hussars; and the trades people in the towns where that regiment had been quartered spoke feelingly of the bills he had left unpaid. In spite of all this, he owed to some mysterious influence a scandalously rapid advancement. He had attained the rank of captain, when in consequence of a scandalous adventure, the secret of which was well guarded, he tried to commit suicide. Being foiled in this attempt, he grew fond of life once more; but no one seemed very fond of him. Eventually he resigned his captaincy, some said voluntarily, and others under compulsion. Now the question arose in his mind how he should manage to live. At first he became a wholesale perfumer's traveller, next he opened some fencing rooms where he made money for a time. Then there was trouble again; one of his pupils was challenged, the master took his place, killed his adversary, and was compelled to leave the country. He took refuge in Belgium, where he became an actor, and at the end of ten months was hissed off the stage. Next came a brief period devoted to politics; and finally, Combelaïne adopted a profession which his enemies rightly called that of a spy. He had now fallen so low that he was ready to do anything for the sake of money. He was brave, possibly, but his courage

after all, was mere confidence in himself, and a feeling of absolute certainty that he could achieve his ends, stopping at nothing as he did. In his eyes murder was the merest trifle, at which he only hesitated when he thought the arm of the law would be swift with its vengeance.

Compared to these two worthy personages, Monsieur Coutanceau was absolutely saintly. He was in reality a commonplace rogue, who for fifteen years had devoted his life to criminal law, with such results that he himself passed several months in prison. He was consoled for this accident, however, by having well feathered his nest, and invested his ill-gotten earnings so that they brought him an income of eighty thousand francs. Despite his air of good-natured indifference, he was in reality vain and ambitious to an extraordinary degree. Having escaped with his neck from certain disgraceful transactions, he had grown to believe himself a financier of great genius, and was quite ready to risk all he had to prove that such was the fact. Finally it must be stated that these three associates were connected with all the movements promoted by a well-known Bonapartist association, commonly called the Club des Culottes de Peau.

One morning Madame Delorge experienced great surprise, for standing at a window, she perceived the Vicomte de Maumussy and M. de Combelaïne coming towards her house. They asked to see the colonel, and were at once shown to his private room. What did they want? Madame Delorge did not even ask herself. Household duties had suddenly required her attention and she was busily engaged when she was abruptly startled by the sound of loud voices. She listened, and could hardly believe her ears when she heard her husband, who was apparently in the greatest possible rage, utter the most violent and appalling oaths. Almost immediately a sound of hurried footsteps was heard on the stairs—the visitors were apparently leaving in very great haste. The colonel was close on their heels, and as soon as he reached the hall he called out to his orderly: "Krauss, look at those two persons, and if ever they come here again remember that I am not at home."

Colonel Delorge must have been very angry, for two hours later, when he took his seat at table he had not regained his usual equanimity; and yet he was evidently fighting for composure. He talked more than was usual with him, and also with more vehemence, although the topic of conversation was unimportant. He was vexed with his boy for some childish blunder, and when Pauline cried he lost his temper entirely, and declared that it was impossible to think with crying children in the house.

His wife looked at him with boundless astonishment, for she had never before seen him in this mood. She dared not question him, however, in the presence of the servants; but when they had left the room the colonel himself was the first to speak. "How would you like to be the wife of a general?" he asked.

Like all loving wives, Madame Delorge was very ambitious for her husband, and supposing that he had some good news for her, she answered:

"Very much, of course; but why do you ask me?"

"Because they are looking for generals."

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?" she asked.

"Those two estimable individuals who were here this morning;" and without waiting for his wife to speak he continued: "This is the case. The officers holding the rank of generals are not enough for the present needs of the army. Bedeau, Bugeaud, Lamoricière, and Changarnier are in the way. New ones are wanted immediately, and from among them a Minister of

War will be chosen ; and in order to court popularity we are to undertake new expeditions against the tribes."

His wife turned pale at the thought of the battle of Isly, and in a trembling voice she asked : "Are you going, Pierre?"

"If I receive my orders, of course. But don't be troubled ; the orders will not come. I have none of the requisite qualities. So don't rely too strongly on being a general's wife, for since this morning it has become highly improbable that the honour will ever be yours." He rolled up his napkin as he spoke, tossed it on the table, and then pushing back his chair, hastily left the room.

"Mercy on us !" muttered Krauss.

This scene amounted to nothing perhaps, and in ninety-nine houses out of a hundred it would have passed unnoticed. But as a grain of sand falling into a pure mountain brook suffices to mar its purity, so did this brief violence disturb the peace and harmony of this happy home.

"There is no doubt about it !" thought Madame Delorge. "Something has happened, and I believe that these two adventurers have more or less to do with it." But in vain did her imagination try to establish any possible connection between the so-called Vicomte de Maumussy or his shady companion and her loyal husband.

These two personages had by this time succeeded in gathering quite a little circle about them. The vicomte was now regarded as a power in the political world of the colony. Monsieur de Combelaïne, invited to a fencing match, distinguished himself in wonderful style. On his side Coutanceau gambled, lost, and paid, with the best grace in the world. They gave dinners and good wine, followed by *soirées*, where boundless quantities of punch were served. But at last one day they went off as silently and as quietly as they had come. Madame Delorge breathed a sigh of relief, for she had instinctively learned to associate her husband's unwonted moodiness with their presence.

"Now," she thought, "Pierre will be like himself once more."

Not at all. On the contrary, the colonel became more and more absorbed. Preparations were being made throughout the colony for the expedition he had spoken of to his wife, but he did not yet know if his regiment would be included in it. It was not, and this proved a great mortification to both men and officers, who had confidently looked forward to winning promotion by gallant deeds.

"Our colonel is out of favour," they said among themselves. And of this they became still more certain when they saw several other colonels, of far less distinction, ordered off.

The powers that were, however, probably considered that it would be most impolitic to sacrifice a man so generally esteemed and respected as Colonel Delorge, and accordingly he received his promotion to the rank of General of Brigade early in 1851, and with it the order to return to Paris and report to the Minister of War. But his advancement seemed to irritate rather than please him ; so much so that every one noticed the constrained smile with which he received the congratulations addressed to him on all sides. And that evening, when he and his wife were alone, he said to her : "Do you know what I ought to do if I had an ounce of common sense ? I ought to send in my resignation, and we would go and live at Glorière. We have a large income now."

But she hastily exclaimed : "It would be the height of folly, and a thing you must not do, at least if I have any influence over you."

And Madame Delorge did have influence over her husband, for she induced him to relinquish the idea, already nearly decided upon, of leaving the service. She was well aware that she assumed a grave responsibility, but she did not shrink from it, so great was her love for her husband and her children, and so strong her wish to do her duty to both. No personal consideration influenced her, for, in fact, the proposal to return to Glorière thrilled her very heart and offered a thousand temptations. Her husband knew this well, and so her words had additional weight when she said: "Be patient, Pierre, and reflect well. Don't yield to a momentary impulse of discouragement, which you would be sure to regret later on. You can send in your resignation at any time, you know!"

Ah! if he had but told her the truth. But no, he remained silent, and they left Oran followed by their devoted servant Karuss.

On presenting himself at the War Office General Delorge learned that his new duties would henceforth keep him in Paris, whereupon he and his wife looked about in search of a suitable residence, and finally selected a pretty little villa surrounded by a large garden at Passy. The price they paid was high, but they disregarded this, on account of the advantages of the garden for their children.

A month later Madame Delorge began to repent having thrown any obstacle in her husband's path when he had wished to resign. He was still loving and tender, but she felt he was slipping away from her. He had so far never concerned himself with politics, and had often been heard to say that a country was in a perilous condition when its generals dropped their swords and took up the pen—and left their saddles for a seat in parliament.

It was, however, very difficult for him in his position to hold himself aloof from public affairs in that fatal year 1851. The uncertainty of the future and its risks were beginning to be profoundly felt in Paris. Every day some new and astonishing report was in circulation, justified by the conduct of the singular persons who now made themselves conspicuous. From every part of France there trooped to the capital like so many dogs scenting a new quarry, all the shady or blighted individuals who had failed in life—the withered fruits as it were of each profession—the disappointed and the scoundrels. Since returning from a diplomatic mission in Germany the Vicomte de Maumussy had been appointed to important functions. The papers named Monsieur Coutanceau for a prefecture—while the Comte de Combelaïne—for he had grown to be a count—occupied a confidential position near Prince Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, President of the French Republic.

What part did General Delorge take in the struggles of the times? Madame Delorge never knew, for the day had passed when she was the confidante of her husband's most secret thoughts. He never said one word to her of his secret plans and opinions. Whenever she asked him any questions, he answered them vaguely, or turned the conversation. Knowing him as she did, she realised that his mind was absorbed in something which, for some reason or other, he wished to keep from her. He rarely went out, but he received a great many visitors—among them numerous deputies. And finally in October she heard him give orders to admit one of the men whom he had formerly so ignominiously expelled from his house—the Comte de Combelaïne.

From that day forth it may be said that Madame Delorge vaguely expected some catastrophe, and it finally came on the 30th of November. The most trifling occurrences of that day were destined to be ineffaceably

engraven on the unhappy woman's memory. It was Sunday. The general rose in much better spirits than usual, and after breakfast, though the weather was cold and foggy, he went down to the lower end of the garden with his son to practise pistol shooting at a target he had had installed there. When at last they came back to the house Raymond said to his mother: "I missed the bull's eye six times, but papa hit it regularly, though he was obliged to use his left hand."

"Yes," added the general, "that confounded right arm of mine twinged frightfully to-day, and it is so stiff I can only move it with difficulty." And, sitting by the fire, he proposed to his wife that they should go together to the theatre that evening.

But while he was yet speaking Krauss came in with a letter. At the sight of the handwriting, the general frowned. He read the missive twice, and crushing it in his hands, he threw it into the fire, exclaiming: "No! A thousand times no!" Then he seemed to reflect, and a minute later he exclaimed: "Little wife, you won't have the pleasure I just promised you. I must keep an appointment which was indefinitely made, and which is now fixed for this evening, as this letter informs me." Then ringing for Krauss, he added:

"Have my full dress ready. I shall dress at half-past eight."

The general's gaiety had fled. He hurried to his private room and did not appear again till dinner time. At nine o'clock he sent Krauss for a vehicle, and, as he kissed his wife, he said: "I shall not be late."

Another moment and he was gone!

IV.

So Madame Delorge was to pass this evening as she had passed many others of late—alone with her children. Pauline asleep in the next room, and Raymond preparing his lessons for the next day. Two things comforted her. The general had gone out in full dress, which seemed to indicate some occasion of ceremony. And he had promised to come home early. With this remembrance to cheer her, she determined to find something to occupy the long hours of waiting—hoping that she might become sufficiently interested to forget to look at the clock. When Raymond had finished his lessons she played several games of dominoes with him, and then sent him off to bed. At eleven she was alone in the drawing-room, and counted the strokes. "He will not come before twelve," she said, half aloud. Then to occupy her time she took up a book, but she could not become interested in it. She began to think of the happy days when her husband had belonged to her entirely. It then required some most extraordinary event to drag him away from her and his fireside in the evening; and if he were obliged to leave her, he always said where he was going and with what object. Then indeed he had no secret from her, and she did not feel that the meshes of some strange intrigue were gathering more and more closely around her.

At last the clock struck twelve. "He will be soon here now!" she said aloud, and then relapsed into her train of thoughts again. With strange persistency there flitted through her mind all the events which had followed the visit of M. de Maumussy and M. de Combelaïne to Oran, and in each one she seemed to detect their mysterious and fatal influences. The injustice with which the general had been treated originated, she firmly believed, with

these two men. Ah! why had she not consented to his resigning his commission.

It was one o'clock, and no general as yet. For a time Madame Delorge wandered restlessly about the room, and then went to the window and looked out into the darkness of the night. Not a sound disturbed the mournful silence of this quiet corner of Passy—not a rumble of wheels, nor a voice, nor the sound of a footstep. The night was very dark, and everything was wrapped in fog as in a winding sheet. She shivered, closed her window, and added a log to the fire. She asked herself if she and her husband had not made a mistake in taking a house so far from the centre of Paris. Passy, in the winter time after ten o'clock at night was the end of the world, and a cab driver could only be persuaded to drive there with difficulty. Perhaps at this very moment the general was impatiently looking for a vehicle. Perhaps he would even be compelled to return on foot. "No, he will come in a cab," she thought, "because he knows how foolishly anxious I always become when he remains out late."

However, in spite of all this reasoning she grew sadder and more and more disturbed. How dreary her once glad life had become! Her happiness and peace seemed to have flown for ever away! Why had she allowed herself to be thrust aside in this fashion? Why had she not torn this secret from her husband—this secret which evidently harassed him so sorely?

Two o'clock! She could not take her eyes from the clock. She counted each minute, each second, and again and again said to herself: "Before the large hand is there I shall hear his step!"

But the large hand, with its even, imperceptible motion, passed the fixed point, and still not a sound came. The unhappy woman thought of the letter which had deprived her of the pleasant evening she had promised herself. Where had this wretched document come from? What could it have contained to induce her husband to say with such fierceness, "no—a thousand times no!" At last she heard the church bell ring four o'clock matins, and, faint and sick with suspense, she staggered to the window again. "What can have happened to him!" she asked herself; and the idea of some terrible accident took possession of her mind. She left the drawing-room and entered the hall, which was dimly lighted by a lamp which was dying out. On one of the chairs sat Krauss—but he was not asleep; for, as his mistress's dress rustled, he started up, and in the same tone with which he would have answered to the roll call, he exclaimed, "Madame!"

The poor woman's heart sank. Why was not this man asleep—he who always dropped off whenever he had the slightest opportunity? Had he any especial reason for being anxious? "Krauss," she said, "do you know where your master went?"

"No, madame."

"Didn't you hear the address he gave to the driver?"

"No, madame," answered Krauss again; and then he added: "Nothing can have happened to the general, madame; he had his sword with him."

Madame Delorge turned silently away. She felt certain now that something terrible had come to pass. She entered her son's room and kissed him on his forehead as he slept. "Poor boy!" she said. "God grant that he will not awake to sorrow!"

The dawn broke gray and cold, and suddenly the ringing of the bell at the garden gate resounded through the house. "It is he!" she cried—for she thought she recognized her husband's way of ringing, and she was

darting towards the door when her strength failed her, and she sank on to a chair.

There she remained listening to every sound. She heard Krauss open the gate, which creaked on its hinges. Then she distinguished several voices and a sound of steps on the gravel walk. "It is very strange," she thought; "Pierre has not come home alone."

But the same steps entered the house—heavy steps coming nearer up the stairs—unsteady ones, as if a heavy burden were being carried. Mad with terror, she started to her feet. But at the same moment the drawing-room door was thrown open, and two men, whom she did not know, came in followed by Krauss, who was as white as the plaster of the wall against which he leaned.

"My husband!" she gasped.

One of the men, who was pale and trembling with emotion, advanced towards her. "Courage, madame," he said, with respectful sympathy.

She understood, poor thing; and in a faint voice murmured: "Dead—is he dead?" "Her eyes closed, as if she could not look the terrible truth in the face, but as Krauss started forward she opened them and waved him aside. "Take me to him," she said; "I must see him! Where is he?"

One of the strangers pointed to an open doorway, and Madame Delorge rushed through it into her husband's bedroom, which was lighted by a single candle alone. Upon the bed, the eider-down quilt of which had been hastily caught off and thrown into a corner, lay the body of General Delorge, already cold and stiff. His eyes were wide open, and his face wore a terrible expression of mingled hate and contempt. His coat was stained with mud and partially unbuttoned, and one of his epaulettes was missing. On a chair near the bed lay his cloak, his unsheathed sword, and his hat, the plumes of which were drenched with rain.

At this appalling sight the poor woman stopped short with dilated eyes and her arms extended, as if to ward off some terrible vision. She could not believe in the reality of what she saw. But this only lasted for a moment. She approached the bed and threw both arms around the inanimate body of the man whom she adored, as if, in her wild grief, she hoped that her embraces would restore life to the heart which for so many years had beaten only for herself.

"Poor woman!" muttered one of the strangers, in a tone loud enough to be heard by Krauss.

But at this moment she started back with a wild look of horror. "Blood!" she cried. "Blood!"

Her hands were indeed red with blood, and spots could be seen on the lace trimmings of her sleeves. "Ah! my husband has been assassinated," she added.

But the younger of the two strangers shook his head. "No!" he said, "you are spared that crowning sorrow. General Delorge fell in a duel."

"And after a fair and honest contest," added the other.

She looked at them both in turn without seeming to understand them, and then slowly repeated: "A duel—honest contest!"

Meanwhile the two men talked together in a corner. One of them—the younger one—was again the spokesman; he came forward and bowed profoundly. "We were charged," he said, "with a most fearful mission. We have fulfilled it, and, unless we can serve you, or you have some orders to give, we ask your permission to retire." He waited for a reply, and, as none came, he added: "Here is my card, madame, and I beg you to command my services whenever you may need them."

He laid a card on the mantel-shelf as he spoke, and then he and his companion withdrew, without any one in the room thinking of detaining them.

Madame Delorge was kneeling at the foot of the bed, holding one of the dear, cold hands. "Pierre," she murmured, "forgive me. It is I who have killed you. You foresaw this death the day you spoke of retiring from the world and living at Glorière. And I prevented you—poor fool that I was—and it was I who led you into the midst of your enemies——"

So agonized was her tone that poor Krauss could not bear it. He touched her lightly on the shoulder. "Madame," he said, "madame."

But she did not seem to hear him. "At Glorière we might have been so happy," she exclaimed—"and now this horrible, sudden death! I will not live without you, my beloved——"

Poor Krauss sobbed aloud. "She is crazy," he said. "She means to kill herself, and then what will become of the poor children and I?" He was praying for some help, some inspiration from Heaven, when suddenly he heard a loud cry of grief. He turned and beheld Raymond, who, aroused by the bustle, had come into the room. The lad hastened to his mother, and throwing his arms around her neck, cried, amid convulsed sobs: "Dead! My poor father is dead!"

Perhaps this was the poor woman's salvation. Her son's arms, his tears falling on her face, recalled her to herself, to duty, and to life. She remembered that she was a mother as well as a wife; that she did not belong to herself; that she had no right to die. She kissed her son tenderly, and for a time murmured soft, broken words. At last she spoke aloud again. "Tell me all you know, Krauss," she said. "I can bear it now."

The old soldier looked at her inquisitively. "What do you wish me to tell you, madame?" he stammered.

"Tell me how your master died, Krauss. There was a duel—but where, and with whom?"

"Alas! madame, I don't know."

"Didn't these men, who were probably the general's seconds, give you the particulars?"

"No, madame—none."

She naturally supposed that he was concealing something from her, and so, somewhat harshly, she rejoined: "I insist on your speaking, Krauss."

The poor fellow was desperate. "On my honour, madame, I know nothing. I was so overcome that I never asked a question. I hurried to the door when I heard the bell—a vehicle was there, and two men got out and asked if this house belonged to General Delorge. I answered yes. They then asked whom they were speaking to, and when I said I was the general's orderly they replied: 'Then we can tell you everything. Your master has just been killed in a duel.' I felt as if I were stunned, and answered, 'Impossible!' 'Not impossible,' said the men, 'for the body is here, and you must help us to carry it upstairs.' Then they asked if the general was married, and where you were. I told them you were up, whereupon they said that was better, perhaps, and that when we had carried the body upstairs they would see you, if you were willing. This is just what we did, and you know the rest."

As Krauss spoke, the widow's pale cheeks flushed with anger. "And is this all?" she asked.

"All, madame."

She waved her hand, and in a tone of bitter irony, exclaimed: "And this is the way of the world! A man fights a duel—he is killed—and his friends

—his seconds—perhaps the very men who pushed the matter to this climax—think they have done their entire duty when they have brought his body back to his house, where they arrive at daylight, and said to his widow, ‘Here is your husband; we have nothing more to do with the affair.’”

Krauss fully understood his mistress’s grief, but her indignation was beyond his comprehension. In his judgment, a duel was one of those accidents of life, like a fall from a horse or a cannon-ball—and if a man died it little mattered, in his opinion, whether it was on the battle-field or in his bed. As to the conduct of the two strangers, it seemed to him so natural that he even undertook to defend them. “Excuse me, madame,” he remarked, “but these two gentlemen asked you before they left if they could be of use to you.”

“I daresay; but I did not notice,” she answered, wearily.

“And one of them even left his card. Would you like to see it?”

“Yes, give it to me.”

He handed it to her, and she read aloud: “Dr. J. Buiron, Rue des Sausstaves.” A physician then had been present at the duel, or had been called in immediately afterwards. This discovery comforted the poor wife, for she fancied that some attempt had been made to save her husband. “We must see this Dr. Buiron again, and ask him for the particulars!” she said, whereupon Krauss turned to go at once. “Wait,” added his mistress, “you are needed here. I must send some else—and who shall that be?”

Madame Delorge had lived a life of great retirement at all times, but since her return to Paris it had almost been one of isolation. Devoting herself to the education of her children she barely saw anyone, and it seemed at first as if there were nobody to whom she could turn on this pressing emergency.

Krauss came to her assistance. “You know, madame, how much our neighbour, Monsieur Ducoudray, loved my master——”

“You are right, go to him,” replied the widow.

This M. Ducoudray was Delorge’s nearest neighbour, for a simple hedge divided their respective gardens. He was a man who had been in trade, and had retired after amassing a comfortable fortune. He had all the faults of the traditional Parisian of the middle classes, being endowed with mingled simplicity and cunning. He was sceptical and superstitious; obliging, and yet selfish; intensely ignorant, and yet always ready with his opinion on all subjects. By no means lacking acuteness, he busied himself with politics, found fault with every government, constantly advised a revolution, and was always prepared to take refuge in his cellar on the day it burst out. He was a widower, with one child, a daughter, married in the provinces. He was careful of his dress, looked younger than his years, had by no means lost the wish to please, and occasionally alluded to the possibility of marrying again. His intercourse with the general had begun with the flowers and vines they had exchanged; and after a time the two men saw each other every day. Being quite at home in Paris, M. Ducoudray was enabled to serve the general and his wife in many little ways. He enjoyed executing commissions, and he was delighted, for instance, when the general asked him to buy a stock of firewood for him.

Such was the man who, ten minutes after Krauss had gone for him, entered the drawing-room, where Madame Delorge was waiting. He was pale and trembling with emotion. “Oh! madame,” he cried, “What a terrible misfortune!” And the broken-hearted widow was compelled to listen to some of those well-meant condolences which fall on great sorrows like

boiling oil on live coals. "It is a very strange affair," said M. Ducondray, "for it is not natural for people to fight duels in the middle of the night." Madame Delorge started. Stunned by the blow, she had not made this reflection, simple as it was. "No," continued the worthy man, "affairs of honour are not usually settled like that. Seconds are chosen, you know, on both sides, and these seconds meet and settle all preliminaries. At least this was the way things were done in my time."

When he at last stopped talking, Madame Delorge explained what she wanted of him.

"Certainly," he said, "I understand. I will take a vehicle at once and go and see this physician, and I will hasten back to tell you what he says."

He left the room as he spoke, and hardly had he gone than Krauss appeared at the door of the general's bed-chamber. "Madame!" he exclaimed, in a hoarse voice, "madame!"

The old orderly who had been so pale with anguish a moment before was now transfigured. Bright colour flushed his tawny cheeks and his eyes flamed angrily.

"What is it?" asked Madame Delorge in dismay.

"It is this, madame," replied the old soldier, with a threatening gesture; "my general was not killed in a duel!"

She did not at first grasp his meaning, but stared at him wildly. "Krauss," she slowly said, "what do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, madame. There has been no duel."

Madame Delorge started to her feet. "I am his wife—his widow! I am no coward! Whom have you seen? Who has told you anything?"

"No one, madame. But the wound tells me all. Listen to me, dearest mistress, and you will see precisely what I mean. You have seen my general and I when we were teaching Master Raymond to fence. You noticed that we each stood sideways so as to present as little surface as possible to our opponent. Well—in a duel the position is the same. Consequently, if one receives a wound it is on the side nearest one's adversary—that is to say, on the side of the arm which holds the sword."

Madame Delorge was listening breathlessly.

"Now," continued Krauss, slowly and distinctly, "if my general were to fight a duel which side would be present to his adversary? The right side? By no means. No; for since Isly he has not been able to use his right arm."

"Yes, yes! and yesterday he could not hold even a pistol in his right hand. I see—my God—I see!"

"Exactly! And when he fenced it was with his left hand. Very well, it is under the right breast, and well towards the side that the general received the terrible wound which killed him. This proof and the reasoning were clear. Besides," continued the old soldier, "I have another proof. Yesterday I buckled a new sword to my master's side, one he wore for the first time; and I am ready to take my oath that this sword has never been crossed with another."

"It is plain, then," murmured Madame Delorge, half fainting, "that my husband has been murdered!"

V.

For the second time this formidable accusation had passed the heart-broken widow's lips; but at first the words had been a despairing cry, which had escaped her almost unconsciously, when she saw the blood on her hands—whereas this time the charge was deliberate. "Krauss," she said, as soon as she could speak, "go to the police-office, and send some one to me at once!"

At this moment her little girl was brought to her, and the poor mother took the child in her arms and kissed her passionately. "Yes, my darling," she said, "your poor father shall be avenged. All the strength of mind and body which God has endowed me with shall be devoted to that purpose."

She could say no more—her sufferings were too acute, and she gave the child back to the nurse, bidding the latter take her away.

It was not long before the Commissary of Police arrived. He was tall and thin, with a large nose and small eyes. His gait, gestures, and voice all indicated that he had an extremely good opinion of himself. An old gentleman wrapped up in a fur coat accompanied him. This was the official physician who always attended on such dismal occasions. The commissary spread paper and pens with an ink-bottle on the table in a business-like way, and then, being seated, pompously exclaimed: "Madame, I am ready."

Rapidly, and as clearly as possible, Madame Delorge then laid before him all the particulars she knew of this disastrous event, mentioning in conclusion the astonishment of her neighbour, M. Ducoudray, who refused to admit the possibility of a duel in the night, and her own suspicions and those of Krauss.

"Is that all?" asked the commissary who was quite unmoved.

"All, sir."

Thereupon he took the floor, and, in a didactic tone he pointed out to her the frequent injustice of such suspicions. He was, he said, far from agreeing with M. Ducoudray, who was hardly the man to judge of such matters. He had known in his own experience, no less than ten duels in the night. Such occurrences might be rare among the middle classes, but among military men they were by no means uncommon. Hot-blooded men are not apt, when they wear swords, to think much of the time or place at which they use them. He was long in expressing this opinion, for he carefully rounded his periods and weighed his words, and frequently looked at the medical man for his approbation.

Madame Delorge felt her blood boiling in her veins. "In short, sir——" she began.

But he imposed silence upon her with a majestic gesture, and went on in an unchanged voice: "I have now made my notes, and I wish to see the defunct."

The courageous woman rose to accompany the commissary, and, without heeding his advice to remain where she was, she, herself, opened the door leading into the next room. Everything was already changed there, thanks to Krauss. On the bed now drawn out of the alcove, lay the body of the general, covered with a sheet, which fell in stiff folds to the floor. At the head of the bed, on a table having a white cloth, stood a crucifix between two lighted candles, while a branch of palm was dipped in a bowl of holy water. Two priests were kneeling in front of the crucifix and reciting the prayers for the dead.

The doctor turned down the sheet and examined the body, now undressed and cleansed of all stains of blood, and in medical terms he proceeded to state

the position and dimensions of the fatal wound. He said that the body showed no other indications of recent violence, but he described several old scars, particularly one on the right arm, and concluded his examination by expressing the opinion that there was nothing to preclude the idea of an honourable duel. If the death were the result of a crime, the crime had been committed by some one standing very close to the general, some one in whom he placed every confidence, and in that case there had been no contest of any kind.

"But," cried honest Krauss, "the crime is shown by the fact that my master is wounded in the right side. You can see for yourself that it was impossible for him to hold a sword in his right hand."

The doctor shook his head. "You are wandering from my department," he said. "I can only state what I see. I have already noted that the defunct has a large scar on his right arm. But I cannot now tell what difficulty, whether great or small, he had in using that arm."

Then came the examination of the general's sword. It was new, as Krauss had said, and the commissary admitted that it had never been used. "But the general may have employed another sword," he added. "I know several instances."

Here Madame Delorge interposed. "Let us admit, for a moment, the supposition that my husband fought a duel—that he used another sword than his own—why, then, in that case is his own out of the scabbard?"

But the commissary was by no means pleased by this acuteness, and he coolly answered: "Justice never sleeps; and if a crime has been committed, madame, it will certainly be punished." He thereupon put the general's sword back into the scabbard and sealed it, lighting his wax at one of the candles which burned at the head of the corpse, and saying as he did so that it would be unnecessary to examine it again.

The doctor had by this time finished his dreary task, and had spread the sheet over the general's body again. The two men then rapidly completed the remaining formalities of the law, and, bowing low, they retired with slow and solemn steps.

A thousand lamentable details then claimed Madame Delorge's attention; it is only in romances that great griefs are never intruded upon by vulgar cares and the odious requirements of civilization. Alone, without any relatives, without friends to spare her this additional trial, the unhappy widow was compelled to occupy herself with all the dismal details of the funeral; and there were letters also to be written. In addition to this, the shock to Raymond's nerves proved so great that he was suddenly taken alarmingly ill. All this confusion and activity prevented Madame Delorge from noticing the fact that M. Ducoudray had not returned, although he had started off at ten o'clock in the morning, and it was now four in the afternoon. It was quite dark before he arrived, and in what a state he was! Pale, exhausted, and covered with mud.

"Good heavens!" cried Madame Delorge, "what has happened to you?"

The worthy man smiled faintly. "Nothing, madame, except that I could find neither cab nor omnibus. I got caught in a shower, and was compelled to walk back through the mud. But that's nothing. I have fulfilled my mission, and will tell you the whole story."

He thereupon settled himself in his chair with the air of a man whose narrative was likely to prove a lengthy one. "On leaving here," he said, "I went at once to Dr. Buiron's, but he was out; his servant told me he would return, however, at one o'clock, as that was his consultation hour. As I had

two hours before me, I then went to breakfast, but I returned at one, and found the doctor, who seems to me a very honest man. As soon as he knew that I came from you, he said, 'I counted on being asked to give an account of the occurrences of last night, and so I wrote them down before I slept.' This paper, madame, he confided to me, and I will, with your permission, now proceed to read it."

M. Ducoudray thereupon wiped his spectacles, drew a paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and began to read as follows:—"An account of what happened to me on the night from November 30th to December 1st, 1851. It was about two o'clock, and I was asleep, when my door-bell rang violently. My servant almost immediately entered my room with a young cavalry officer, who, in a state of great agitation, said to me: 'Doctor, a great misfortune has just occurred; one of our generals is mortally wounded. Come with me quickly.' I dressed as rapidly as possible, and followed this officer. He led me to the Elysée—to the palace of the prince-president. But we did not go in by the main gate. He opened a side entrance, crossed a court-yard, and finally introduced me into a large gallery situated on the ground floor, and lighted by a lantern, which seemed to have been brought from a neighbouring stable. We there found three men wearing evening dress. They were talking with great earnestness, and evidently belonged to the highest class of society. They uttered an exclamation of satisfaction when I appeared, and hastily led me to a corner, where, under a cloak, there lay a man in a general's uniform—they called him General Delorge. I instantly saw that he must have been dead for at least a couple of hours. However, I made an examination, and discovered a sword wound in the right side, which must have been almost immediately fatal. I asked what had happened, and was told that General Delorge and one of his colleagues had, after a violent altercation, gone out into the garden and fought by the light of a lantern held by a stable-boy. No reply was made to various questions I addressed to the party, but I was asked to accompany one of these gentlemen to the late General's house and deliver the body to his widow. This I could not refuse to do. A cab was sent for, in which the corpse was placed, and I got in with a gentleman, whose name is unknown to me. He did not speak one word on our way to Passy, and when we left the house after fulfilling our mission he merely said: 'Take the cab—I have business in this neighbourhood.' He then handed me two hundred francs in two notes. On my return to my room I wrote down these facts, which I swear to be precisely accurate."

Whiter than snow—with dilated eyes and her hands clutching hold of the arms of her chair—Madame Delorge leaned forward, listening to each word, which confirmed all her suspicions. Why this mystery unless there were some crime to hide? Why was this body concealed in this lower room—why this conference between these men—this tardy summoning of a physician—the going and coming through these private doors, and this obstinate refusal to reply to all questions? Thus pondering, the poor woman, when M. Ducoudray ceased to read, murmured half to herself: "We must have proofs! And how shall we procure them?" The worthy man slowly took a pinch of snuff, and then rejoined: "These are the facts, and this is all I could hear from the doctor. However, I then determined to go to the Elysée."

Madame Delorge started. "Oh! monsieur," she exclaimed, "how can I ever thank you——"

He interrupted her with a deprecatory gesture. "When I take an idea into my head," he said, "I am apt to carry it out without much delay, and

three minutes later I was at the president's palace. I had decided to address myself to the commandant—a tall, handsome man, who at first looked at me with rather a suspicious air. No, he knew nothing of what had taken place the night before at the Elysée; he was relieved at midnight, and the officer on duty had said nothing of any extraordinary event. And as I continued to talk, he begged me politely, but firmly, to leave the guard-room, and allow him to attend to his duties. That was not very encouraging. But I would not own myself beaten. I determined to try and enter the palace. I went to the main entrance and said as I entered, 'Upholsterer?' But a doorkeeper caught me by the arm and wheeled me round—'Upholsterers,' said he, 'do not come in at this gate.'"

M. Ducoudray might have made his tale less lengthy, but it would have been cruel to interrupt him. "Thus defeated," said he, "I tried another device. I stood outside near the gate, determined to accost all the officers who came out. Ah, madame, the military men of my youth were more polite than those of to-day! Every one to whom I spoke glared at me disdainfully, and said: 'What are you talking about? Duel! I know nothing of any duel!'"

To Madame Delorge this was only another proof of the mystery in which the crime was enshrouded. She knew that her husband was so much liked and respected that the news of his death would surely have created a great sensation among his brother officers.

"I began to feel somewhat discouraged," continued M. Ducoudray, "when I noticed a man of forty, or thereabouts, wearing civilian dress. However, his moustache and his general demeanour indicated that he was an officer. I went up to him, and without the least preamble I said, 'Sir, I am the nearest relative of General Delorge.' By the start he gave I saw that he knew more than the others, but he nevertheless answered me in precisely the same way. 'Sir,' said I, 'he was brought home dead this morning at daybreak; the persons who brought him said he was killed in a duel, but they did not give either the name of his adversary or those of his seconds. We are resolved to know them. I spoke very loudly, and made a great many gesticulations. The passers-by stopped to know what was going on; and my man did not like this. 'For Heaven's sake,' he said, 'don't talk so loud. I know something about the affair, and after all I see no harm in telling you what I know. Last evening, Madame Salvage, the former friend of Queen Hortense, and who, as you are no doubt aware, does the honours of the palace, held a small reception there. I was among the guests. About midnight I was talking with some friends in the vestibule when I heard voices raised in dispute on the stairs. Two men who were in a towering rage, and one whom I recognised as General Delorge, were coming down. The other one said to him: 'We have our swords, sir, and there is the garden; a groom from the stables will hold a lantern.' Thereupon they went out, and this morning I learned that poor Delorge had been killed.'"

Madame Delorge rose to her feet. "And the other man!" she cried, "what was his name?"

"Alas!" answered M. Ducoudray, "the person I spoke to would not, or could not tell it me. I endeavoured to obtain it by threats. I told him that a duel without seconds is an assassination, to which he rejoined that there was a witness if there were no seconds; and when I asked what witness he meant, he replied: 'The groom who held the lantern.' Now, Madame, it is this groom that we must find, for he must know the truth!"

Overwhelmed by a conviction of her own helplessness, Madame Delorge could not speak. What could she do? She was a widow, friendless, without influence or support, and her plans had already been disapproved of by the Commissary of Police, who had talked to her of the wickedness of suspicions.

"In your place, madame," said Ducoudray, "I should appeal to some of the general's friends. Some of them would, no doubt, take up the investigation. If I knew who they were —"

"Wait a moment!" said Madame Delorge, as she hastened from the room, soon reappearing with a little book in which her husband had noted down addresses. She hastily turned over the leaves and read name after name, at hap-hazard: "Comte de Commarin, Rue de l'Université; The Duc de Champdoce, Rue de Varennes; General Changarnier, Rue du Faubourg-Saint Honoré; General Lamoricière, Rue Las Cases; General Bedeau, Rue de l'Université."

"That's enough," interrupted Ducoudray. "If one of the generals you have named would take your cause in hand, why if a crime has been committed, as I believe, General Delorge will be avenged."

She was silent for a moment, and then, in a low firm voice, replied; "I will act to-morrow."

VI.

It was the second of December, 1851, a Tuesday. After a night of sleepless sorrow passed beside the lifeless body of the only man she had ever loved, Madame Delorge sent for a cab and drove away from her home. She had often heard her husband speak of General Bedeau as one of the bravest and most loyal men in the army. She had often seen him, and often received him at her table while they were residing in Algeria. It was to him, therefore, that she thought of first applying, and on her way to his residence she asked herself what she should say to arouse his sympathy effectually. But a sudden shock interrupted the course of her reflections. Her cab had been stopped near the Pont d'Iéna, and in some surprise she looked out to ascertain the cause, and also the meaning of the noise she heard. It was a detachment of artillery, three or four batteries, passing at full speed across the bridge, and turning abruptly to the right along the Quai de Billy. Madame Delorge could distinguish the cannons and caissons and the soldiers in their long blue overcoats, while the officers, sabres in hand, galloped up and down the column, shouting their commands in voices which rose above the rattle of the wheels. As soon as this body had swept by, the cab went on again, but not very far, for midway down the Quai de la Conférence it stopped afresh, and Madame Delorge heard her driver bandying words with some one she could not see. She lowered the glass in front. "What is the matter?" she asked.

"It seems," said the man, sulkily, "that vehicles are not allowed to pass. Look, madame!"

She looked—and saw that the whole length of the Champs Elysées—as far as the Place de la Concorde—was filled with cavalry drawn up arranged in line.

"They say," grumbled the coachman, "that we must cross the Seine by the Pont d'Iéna. It's abominable, I think!" and as he turned his horse's head he said, with an oath, "The devil take all reviews!"

Madame Delorge also supposed that a review was going on, and was

troubled lest she might, consequently fail to find General Bedeau at home. All the troops in Paris seemed to have turned out of their quarters. Regiments were spread out along the left bank of the Seine, while others were massed on the Esplanade des Invalides and around the Palace of the Corps Législatif. Here the cab could move no further, and Madame Delorge determined to proceed the rest of the way on foot. But the further she went the more astonished she became at the immense number of men under arms. The whole neighbourhood, moreover, had a strange look. An unusual number of police were moving about, and groups clustered at every corner reading placards affixed to the walls. Madame Delorge knew nothing of the intrigues and the political passions of this troubled epoch, and she was at a loss to understand this excitement. After all, what did it matter to her? Grief is selfish, and she saw no connection between this agitation and her husband's death.

Absorbed in her own thoughts she hurried on, but at the corner of the Rue de Bellechasse and the Rue de l'Université she could go no further, for a compact crowd had assembled there. A man was talking with angry vehemence in the centre of the throng, and she instinctively stopped to hear what he said. "It is an unheard-of crime! a most monstrous thing to arrest a man like that!" On hearing this, Madame Delorge turned to an old man at her side who seemed to be as angry as the others. "Who is it," she asked, "that has been arrested?"

"Bedeau, madame, General Bedeau."

She nearly fainted at the news, and then with the idea that the man was playing a joke upon her, she said: "Impossible! you are not in earnest?"

"I am, indeed," he answered. "Bedeau was arrested this morning as if he had been a vile criminal—dragged out of bed by six agents of the police, and carried off to prison. He struggled bravely, and called from the window of the cab: 'Treason! Treason! I am General Bedeau. Help, citizens! It is the Vice-President of the National Assembly who is being carried away!'"

"Yes," interposed another man, "that is exactly what he said."

At this moment a body of police arrived to clear the street, and in the twinkling of an eye the crowd scattered in every direction, while Madame Delorge took refuge under a door-way. The poor woman decided to go and see General Lamoricière, since to reach Bedeau was impossible. Accordingly she turned back, and at last entered the Rue de Las-Cases, where all was calm, silent, and deserted. There was not a human being to be seen from one end of the street to the other. The door of number 11 stood open, and Madame Delorge entered. At the foot of the stairs stood an old woman, who was evidently the concierge, talking with two young men, lodgers in the house. Madame Delorge went toward them, and, with a tinge of anxiety in her voice, asked: "Where shall I find General Lamoricière?"

The group started back and examined her with distrust. But at last the concierge answered: "He is arrested."

Madame Delorge caught at the wall for support. "He, too!" she cried.

"Yes, madame—this morning at daybreak. He called for aid, and they told him they would put a gag in his mouth if he did not hold his tongue." The woman's eyes blazed as she continued: "When the police came they told my husband to take them to the general's rooms, and he wouldn't do so. He shouted as loud as he could, 'Robbers! Help!' And then do you know what happened?" As she spoke she threw open the door of her room

and showed a poor fellow groaning on the bed. "That's the state the wretches left him in," she cried. "There were ten of them, and then they wanted to kill him, and, in fact, one of them cut him with his sword. But if there's justice left in France to-day we'll have it."

Seeing the ungovernable emotion of Madame Delorge, the two young men thought she must be a relative of the illustrious general, and so they courteously said, "Don't be troubled, madame, there's no danger—no one will dare touch a hair of his head. Besides, he is not the only one who is arrested—Cavaignac, Changarnier, Charras, and Thiers himself, are probably all at Mazas by this time!"

Without waiting to hear another word, Madame Delorge turned and fled. All her hopes were crushed. To whom could she turn now? Who would aid her now that all those on whom she relied were in prison? However, she hurried on towards the Palace of the Corps Législatif. Troops were drawn up all round the square, and under the portico she saw a confused mass of soldiers and citizens. Near her a voice called out: "The representatives, too!"

"The representatives first!" replied another voice. So then, the representatives of the people were to be driven from the palace by the soldiery! However, some of them resisted, whereupon they were pushed and buffeted, while two or three who attempted to address the crowd were hustled down a side street. Madame Delorge was nearly taken off her feet in the midst of the crowd, when suddenly a man, whom she recognized as a representative she had often seen with her husband, came towards her. In a hoarse voice he abruptly said to her, "You are Madame Delorge, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, madame, you see what is going on. The President of the Republic strangles the Republic which he had sworn to defend and protect. He dissolves the Assembly at the point of the bayonet. And he has found generals in the French army willing to aid him in this dastardly betrayal of his trust. But General Delorge, madame, is the soul of honour and loyalty. Does he know what is going on? Go to him, I implore you, and beg him to hasten here."

"General Delorge is dead," replied the widow in a choked voice.

"Dead!" repeated the deputy, like an echo; and then, transported with rage, he cried: "But we will avenge him, madame; we will avenge him! He could not be bought it seems. This *coup d'état* cannot succeed!"

Madame Delorge felt that she had at last met one of those courageous men who are revolted by crime, and are ready to devote themselves to the just cause of the feeble and the oppressed. But at this moment she saw him surrounded by a gesticulating crowd. She wished to speak to him again, but it was impossible. The surging crowd carried her further and further away. Young men were shouting at her side: "The Constitution is violated! Louis Bonaparte is beyond the pale of the law!"

By this time Madame Delorge began to have a dim perception of the motives which had prompted her husband's murder. This plot, which had slowly matured in darkness, needed many accomplices. One word from any of the generals might have defeated it, and this word her husband might have uttered. Perhaps he had discovered the secret, or it might have been heedlessly confided to him by one of those concerned. At last, then, Madame Delorge realized how closely her destiny was associated with that of the *coup d'état*. If it failed she would not lack assistance in her work of vengeance; but if it succeeded, she would never be listened to.

Suddenly a sharp pang came to her heart. The general's funeral was to take place at three o'clock; it was now twelve, and she was at an appalling distance from home. She forgot her fatigue, and hastened back to the spot she had left her cab; but it was no longer there—the driver had been obliged to retreat before the advancing troops, and it was only after a long search that she at last found it on the Quai d'Orsay. "Home!" she said, as she sunk into her seat; "and drive with the greatest possible speed."

This was a simple order to give, but one that proved impossible to execute on account of the incessant movements of the troops. The driver whipped up his horse, but was obliged to stop just as he entered the Champs Elysées. The President of the Republic, Prince Louis Napoléon Bonaparte, was advancing on horseback down the avenue, accompanied by a numerous escort, among which she recognized the Comte de Combelaine. Then a sudden inspiration flashed through her mind, and extending her arms, "It is he!" she cried; "it is he!"

But the cry was unheard in the noise, except by De Combelaine, who glanced into the cab. His eyes met the widow's, and in them her fancy read a gleam of the ironical triumph which is born of impunity. And why not? If the result of the *coup d'état* yet seemed doubtful near the Palais Bourbon, all foretold a victory here near the Elysées. The prince, surrounded by his gorgeous escort—all gold and feathers—was smiling and bowing to the right and to the left, while above the sound of trumpet and bugle there rose from among the intoxicated troops not only shouts of "Long live the President!" but the more significant one of "Long live the Emperor!" In the crowd on the pavement Madame Delorge detected consternation and stupefaction, but threats and imprecations were rare. Only one or two sceptics hazarded allusions to Louis Napoléon's previous ventures at Boulogne and Strasburg. "It is all over!" murmured the poor woman. "All over!"

The triumphal cortege passed on. The driver was then able to move again, and twenty minutes later the vehicle drew up before the door of the villa at Passy, where faithful Krauss awaited his mistress. "Ah! madame," he cried, "we have been so anxious ever since you left. M. Ducoudray was just going to look for you; we did not know what to do."

It was two o'clock, and the undertakers were already there. The door of the house was hung with black. "Where is—my husband?" asked the poor woman.

Krauss trembled apprehensively. "Alas!" he said, "the coffin was brought some time ago, and I laid my general in it."

"You did right," she answered, as with automatic steps, and with fixed, tearless eyes, she slowly ascended the stairs.

The coffin stood on three trestles, covered with a black pall, in the middle of the bedroom. On the pall lay a large white cross, and near by knelt two priests and M. Ducoudray. "Let every one leave the room," said the widow, in a tone which admitted of no questions, "and send my son to me."

She was obeyed, and for a moment she stood alone before the coffin which contained not only all that was mortal of her husband, but also her very happiness, her hopes, her youth. She shivered at the thought that any other hands than hers had laid the lawn over the face which would soon crumble into dust, and she was about to give orders to have the lid of the coffin removed again when she felt her dress pulled from behind. It was her son who sobbed: "Mamma, it is I; you sent for me. Oh! do speak to me!"

She took his hand, and holding it in hers, laid it on the coffin, "I sent for you, my son," she said, "in hopes that the recollection of this frightful moment may never leave your mind. You were a child yesterday, but this terrible misfortune makes you a man. You have a sacred duty to fulfil."

The little fellow looked at her earnestly.

"You have been told," she continued—"I told you myself—that your father was killed in a duel. That is not true. Your father—a brave and gallant soldier—was assassinated, and I know his murderer! Yes, I am ready to swear that I know him." She gasped for breath, and then went on more slowly, emphasising each word, "Everything will be done, my boy, to conceal the truth; and maybe all our efforts will prove useless. Maybe the assassin will appear far beyond and above our reach. That does not matter, Raymond, your father shall be avenged. To this work I shall consecrate my life—you must do the same. Swear to me, my son, that you will devote all your energy, all your intelligence, and all your strength to this sacred cause."

With a solemn gesture Raymond raised his hand, and answered "I swear!"

Before Madame Delorge could add another word heavy steps were heard outside, and some undertakers' assistants appeared at the door, remarking "The coffin looks as if it were pretty heavy."

They proceeded to raise the black drapery, and then the widow felt as if her heart were breaking and her reason deserting her. "No, you shall not take him away," she cried, clutching at the coffin. But it was the last effort she made—her arm fell beside her, and she sank, an inert mass, upon the floor.

VII

It was midnight before Madame Delorge recovered the power of suffering. She was lying on her son's bed, and her maid was asleep in a chair hard by. The poor woman realised that she had only recovered consciousness to fall into that leaden slumber which follows a season of intense emotion. But a great peace rested upon her soul. Her grief was not less overwhelming, it was simply calmer. She now felt capable of facing her present situation and the duties which belonged to her future. Her maid awoke with a start, and, approaching the bed, asked her: "Are you better, madame?"

"Yes, much better—where are my children?"

"Both asleep, madame. But M. Ducoudray would not leave until you were better."

"Very well, then, give me my dressing gown—I will see him. I am not ill—and I *must* see M. Ducoudray."

That gentleman was eager to hear what Madame Delorge had done that morning. He had vaguely heard of the *coup d'état*, but he was unwilling to go into the city to obtain more information until he had seen her. He started up as the widow entered the drawing-room, and when his eyes rested upon her the words he would have spoken died away upon his lips. And no wonder; her hair had grown white—as is rarely the case in real life, though in romances it is of common occurrence—and twenty hours had done the melancholy work of twenty years. Elizabeth, the beautiful, happy wife, was no more; the cold and stately person he beheld was the Widow Delorge.

But she paid no attention to his amazement; indeed, it is doubtful if she perceived it. She at once proceeded to tell him the morning's story. He was utterly bewildered and enraged—all the more so, indeed, as he was a Liberal to the back-bone. He had always been opposed to the tyrant, Louis Philippe, and had even done much, in a quiet way, towards the fall of the oppressor—for which on bended knee, in the silence of his own room, he now, morning and night, implored the forgiveness of Almighty God. In short, he shared all the widow's suspicions. They both decided that the general must have been aware of Louis Napoléon's plot, that advances had been made to him, that he had rejected them and even threatened to expose the whole affair, and had thereupon been killed so that the secret of the conspiracy might not be revealed. But was the murderer M. de Combelaine? This was a point that M. Ducoudray was not prepared to admit; for he remarked that a smile on a man's lips was no proof that he had committed a crime.

"But he did! I know he did," cried Madame Delorge. "That man has been our evil genius. All our misfortunes date from the day when he, with his two companions, arrived at Oran. They were then preparing this *coup d'état*. Now I know what they must have proposed to my husband when they were so ignominiously dismissed from our house. I have never since seen M. de Maumussy, but De Combelaine has been here twice. I know I am right; this is one of those presentiments which never deceive."

"In all this public excitement," remarked M. Ducoudray, "my poor friend's death will pass almost unperceived. It is a hard thing to say, dear madame, but when Paris is calm again the general's death will have been forgotten. I doubt even if we shall obtain an inquest. And our witnesses, where are they?"

He was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Krauss, who was brandishing a paper. The good old fellow checked himself on seeing Madame Delorge, whom he supposed to be in bed, but after a moment's hesitation he began: "I am afraid that Marie, the cook, has made a great blunder. To-day, while the funeral was going on, a man came to speak to madame on important business; in connection, he said, with my poor master. Madame was asleep, and the cook was alone—for we had all gone to the cemetery—so she sent the man away again. He went off reluctantly she said; but before doing so he asked for a pencil and paper, and wrote this."

So saying Krauss handed the paper to his mistress, who after reading it at a glance, passed it on to Ducoudray. "You ask for witnesses," she said, quietly. "What do you think of that one?"

The writing on this paper ran as follows: "*Laurent Cornevin, groom at the Elysée stables, residing at Montmartre, Rue Mercadet, No. 16.*"

M. Ducoudray started up in excitement. "It is the very one!" he exclaimed—"the very groom who held the lantern. This man knows the truth. What a misfortune that I was not here when he came. And why was not this address given to us before?"

Krauss was in despair. "Because," he replied, "the woman—poor simpleton—attached no importance to it, and it was by the merest chance that she spoke of it to me."

Ducoudray had come to a grand decision. "Never mind!" he said,— "we can repair the mistake easily enough. I will see this man early to-morrow morning. The city may not be altogether quiet to-morrow, but as I am a Parisian by birth, a revolution does not alarm me."

Worthy M. Ducoudray's kind cagerness was due, in a great degree, to a motive which he discreetly kept in the background. He had indulged in con-

siderable reflection during the last twenty-four hours, and had asked himself why it would not be a good thing for himself and Madame Delorge to marry at some future period. He himself could see no obstacle to the plan. The lady was not yet forty, to be sure, while he was over sixty; but if she was still beautiful, he looked much younger than his years, and a difference of twenty summers between husband and wife is, after all, nothing very uncommon. Madame Delorge's despair did not discourage him either, for had he not been equally crushed when his wife died, and had he not eventually got over it? Of course it would be the same with her. Is there a sorrow in the world that resists the slow work of time and the dissolving action of weeks succeeding days, and years following months? No—none whatever. He therefore arranged a plan of action. To have risked a word to the widow would have been tantamount to closing her doors against him. But if he could only make himself necessary to her he considered that the ultimate success of his project would be certain. So he determined to adopt the rôle of a confidential friend until she some day realized that he was absolutely indispensable to her, and then he would suddenly unmask his batteries. He could not ask for a better occasion to serve her than this one, for Madame Delorge would refuse nothing to the man who aided her in her work of investigation. In addition, moreover, M. Ducoudray felt a certain satisfaction in being concerned in the affair, for the mystery interested him. It never entered his brain that he was incurring any risk by his interference, and he did not realize that this 2nd of December and the *coup d'état* might end most disastrously for himself as well as for hundreds of thousands of other people.

The chaotic mass of his new ideas agitated him to such a degree that he never closed his eyes that night. He rose at seven, dressed, and took a cup of coffee, and half an hour afterwards was out of doors. It was a dark and rainy morning. The shops in the streets of Passy were being slowly opened. Very few persons were to be met and these were mostly workmen, who talked in low voices with an uneasy air. It was not, however, until M. Ducoudray reached the Place de la Concorde that he realized the gravity of the events that had already taken place and those that were now proceeding. The first division of the Army of Paris, under the orders of General Carrelet, occupied the same position as on the day before in the Champs Elysées, in view of commanding the approaches to the Tuileries and the Elysée Palace. "Well, well!" ejaculated the astonished Ducoudray. "I never saw so many soldiers before!"

The painful shock he experienced was increased when he approached a group which had assembled in the Rue Castiglione, before a recently posted placard. A young man was relating what had occurred at the meeting held by the deputies at the townhall of the Tenth Arrondissement. "There were three hundred representatives present," he said, indignantly, "and they had voted for the removal of the president, and had appointed General Oudinot commander-in-chief, when an officer—a lieutenant—presented himself, and ordered them to disperse. They refused, declaring that they would only yield to force; whereupon the hall was invaded by soldiers, who arrested the representatives and carried them off to prison."

At this point the speaker was interrupted by a police agent who roughly ordered the group to disperse. "It is against the law," he said, "for crowds to collect at the street corners."

This language excited Ducoudray's wrath. "Why do they put up placards then," he asked, "if we are not to be allowed to stop and read them?"

"Move on, I tell you," rejoined the police agent; "if you don't I'll——" here he stopped, but he gave Ducoudray such a threatening look that our worthy friend fancied he could already hear the rattle of his jailer's keys.

He meekly obeyed the injunction to be gone, but as he did so he reflected that it might be as well to defer his visit to Montmartre. In that case, however, what would Madame Delorge think, and what would she say? So he went on again, and on reaching the boulevard he found that the excitement there was very great. But few of the shops were open, and written notices were affixed to the trees, calling on the people to arm themselves. But a police agent passing by saw them, and immediately tore them off. "This looks bad! I smell powder!" said Ducoudray, to himself, and in fact just as he reached the Rue Drouot several young men rushed past him, crying, "To arms! to arms! A representative has been killed in the Faubourg Saint Antoine! To arms!"

"They are right!" said Ducoudray, fiercely, to a man beside him.

The man in question started, but he made no reply, in fact he walked on all the faster. A moment later up came a company of light infantry from the direction of the Madeleine, and our friend turned into the Rue Drouot. Fear imparted the fleetness of youth to his aged limbs, and it was with arrow-like speed that he climbed the Rue des Martyrs. The further he got from the boulevards the quieter the city became. Shopkeepers stood as usual at their doors, and laughed together, shrugging their shoulders with a satirical air. Ducoudray thought, however, that he should find Montmartre in a state of disturbance. Not at all. Never had this unusually excited district looked calmer. At last Ducoudray reached the Rue Mercadet, and repaired to the house indicated on the paper given to the cook.

It was a huge building, five storeys high; and judging from the closely set windows it was divided into innumerable rooms. A long, narrow passage, very dirty and very dark, led to the porter's abode, a little hole under the stairs. Here sat an old woman of whom our friend inquired: "Laurent Cornevin, if you please?"

"He is not at home, but his wife is," said the woman.

"He is married, then?"

"To be sure he is, and has five children!"

With the idea that he should learn from the wife where her husband was, Ducoudray asked what floor the Cornevin's lived on. "The first," chuckled the old woman—"the first coming down from the sky, you understand."

Thus informed, M. Ducoudray climbed the stairs, and at the very top of them he met a woman who proved to be Madame Cornevin herself. She was tall, well built, young, and if not handsome, at all events very pleasant looking, with a frank, honest face. She was poorly but very cleanly dressed, and carried a bright healthy child, six or eight months old, in her arms.

"Come this way, sir," she said, showing her guest into a room shining with cleanliness, and then he perceived that her eyes were swollen with tears.

"Madame," he began, "I wish to see your husband on most important business. Where shall I find him?"

"Alas! sir, I don't know myself."

M. Ducoudray started. "What on earth do you mean?" he asked.

"Just what I say, sir," and the woman's eyes filled as she continued: "He did not come home last night, but I was not anxious, for though it was his off-night, I thought he had taken some comrade's duty. Still, when it

was light I thought I would run to the Elysée and find out, but his companions declared that they had not seen him for three days! I can't understand it; for he's a man who loves his home and children, and has no bad habits. I fear, sir, that something must have happened to him."

Worthy M. Ducoudray had grown very pale, for the disappearance of the one solitary witness of General Delorge's death struck him as much more than a coincidence. He concealed his emotion, however, as best he could.

"Come, come, my good woman," he said, "you must not be so unhappy. Your husband will come back again. He has been detained by some comrade."

"Impossible, sir, for they are all at the Elysée, and they none of them know where he is."

Ducoudray felt a cold chill pass down his spine. One crime had been committed—why not another to conceal the first? "When did you last see your husband?" he asked.

"Yesterday morning, when he went out, saying that he had an errand to do at Passy."

"And he did not say what this errand was?"

"No; he only mentioned that he had to call on the wife of a general on important business."

Two little boys rushed in at this moment, but shrank back on perceiving a stranger. Their mother seemed surprised to see them, and severely asked: "Why have you come home at this hour?"

"The master sent us. He said: 'Run home quick and stay indoors, for there's going to be a revolution.'"

Madame Cornevin turned pale. Although she had been to the Elysée that morning, she had evidently not heard of anything. "A revolution," she murmured, "and I don't know where Laurent is!"

"Is he interested in politics?"

"He! no, sir. He was never interested in anything but in working for the children and me."

Never had our good friend felt so uncomfortable. A thousand vague apprehensions assailed him. This house seemed to him bristling with dangers, and the very floor burned his feet. "I will not trouble you further," he said, "I will call again to-morrow, and then of course your husband will be here."

"And who shall I tell him called?"

M. Ducoudray shuddered at this natural question. No, he would not give his name; it would be the height of imprudence. So he opened his pocket-book, as if to find a card, and then carelessly said: "Never mind! Just say that Monsieur Krauss came to see him."

That was not especially heroic, but the old gentleman was all goose flesh at the thought of Cornevin's being suppressed simply because he possessed an inconvenient secret; and as he descended the stairs he recapitulated to himself the various means he knew of to get rid of a man, from hiring a well-paid assassin and his dagger to employing a cook, induced by golden promises to slip a little poison into some soup. Once out of the house, however, the fresh air and the movement of the streets had their natural effect, and Ducoudray smiled at his exaggerated fears. However, as he approached the boulevards he noticed that the excitement was on the increase—it was indeed much greater now than it had been earlier in the day. Constant shouts went up from the crowd. "The constitution has been violated—Louis Napoléon is beyond the law! To arms! to arms!" Then a man passed

by with a gun over his shoulder. "Come on, citizens!" he cried; "there is fighting in the Rue Rambuteau."

At these words Ducoudray pricked up his ears like an old war-horse at the sound of a trumpet. "This is getting hot!" he muttered. Meanwhile the crowd became more compact and more animated each moment. Speeches were delivered by eager orators, who stood on the chairs in front of the cafés. They read the decree pronounced by the Assembly of the Tenth Arrondissement against Louis Napoléon. Policemen with swords moved up and down among the crowd. Cavalry clattered along the boulevards; the crowd opened to let the horses pass, and then closed up again. Cries of "Vive la République!" arose in every direction. The general fever seized hold of M. Ducoudray—he recalled the glorious days of July—he forgot Passy, Madame Delorge, the general, and M. de Combelaine. "I must see the end of this!" he murmured, as he went into a café on the Boulevard des Italiens for breakfast.

Here he heard all sorts of reports—some true and some false, often very absurd ones—but all of them threatening resistance. It was said that the authors of the *coup d'état* were losing their heads—that M. de Maupas was trembling with fear at the prefecture of police—that General Magnan hesitated—that Lamoricière would not act—that four carriages stood in the court-yard of the Elysée, with horses harnessed, all ready to bear the president and his accomplices far away, and "with him all the treasure he had collected!" added the best informed. Like the true Parisian Ducoudray boasted of being, he imbibed all these reports with the most eager credulity, accepting as the truth whatever pleased him. He had begun to look upon the *coup d'état* as a failure when he left the restaurant, but he soon realized his mistake; for, during the short space of time he had spent at breakfast, the mobile physiognomy of the boulevard had changed. The crowd had become more compact, if possible, but it was ominously silent. Not a laugh was heard; and there were no more shouts of "Down with Soulouque!" which had previously caused the soldiers to open their eyes in astonishment. However, troops were still hurrying to and fro.

"Is there fighting going on anywhere?" asked Ducoudray.

"Yes; there are barricades in the Rue Transnonain, in the Rue Beaubourg, and the Rue Grenetat."

"And the police let them stand," said a man near by.

Suddenly came a shout—followed by profound stillness. "What is it?" asked Ducoudray of two young men who were hurrying past.

"Saint-Arnaud's proclamation."

"Where is it?"

"At the next street corner."

The worthy man hurried there, and amid the indignant remarks of a couple of hundred persons standing round about, he read: "Inhabitants of Paris: The Minister of War calls your attention to the following decree: Each individual caught erecting or defending a barricade, or with arms in his hand, will be shot down."

"LE ROY DE SAINT-ARNAUD,

"Minister of War."

This was brief, significant, and to the point; it embodied, moreover, the entire policy of the *coup d'état*. However, the proclamation seemed to kindle resistance rather than quell it. "They only want a pretext to fire on us," said a man with a white beard. And at this moment, as if to point his words, there came the noise of a violent fusillade in the direction of the

Quartier des Gravilliers. And presently, moreover, a young man dashed by, shouting as he went: "It is in the Rue Aumaire—I am going for a gun."

More than one had the same idea, for two steps further on M. Ducoudray saw a shop-keeper put up his shutters and write on them with chalk: "Arms given to any one applying."

As the night came on, however, the firing diminished. By dint of using his elbows freely, our friend had finally got as far as the Château d'Eau—when all at once a hoarse cry rose from a thousand throats, and he found himself swept along with the crowd. A woman who had lost her hat, and who had a little girl with her, clung desperately to his arm, and implored him to save her child. He tried to help her, but he was thrown against a tree. A whirlwind seemed to pass over him, he caught sight of the flash of a sword, and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was alone; the crowd had dispersed indeed, for several squadrons of lancers had charged, and men were now picking up the wounded.

"And what will to-morrow be?" groaned the old gentleman, who, knowing Paris so well, felt that bitter revenge would be wreaked for this rash act.

Never had a revolution seemed so imminent as on that evening, the 3rd of December, 1851. Despite the renewed protestations and prohibitions of the police, crowds gathered at every corner—blouses jostled coats, and hands hardened by toil grasped white ones daintily gloved. Barricades, moreover, were being rapidly erected in every direction. However, eager as our friend was to see more of the contest, he felt that it was now high time for him to return to Madame Delorge, and as a cab passed by he hailed it and got inside.

VIII.

WHEN M. Ducoudray reached the villa at Passy it was nearly nine o'clock in the evening, and he asked himself what on earth he was to say to the widow. "I have nothing to hide," he reflected, "and yet I certainly acted wisely in not leaving my name. She will not understand it, though, I'm sure." And he sighed despondently.

He expected to find Madame Delorge wild with suspense; but she quietly took her little girl from her lap as he entered the room, and calmly exclaimed: "Well, sir?" She was very pale, but her demeanour shewed that she was firmly determined to keep up her courage and fulfil her duties. Raymond was seated at the table learning his lessons, and as Madame Delorge repeated her query, M. Ducoudray looked meaningly at the boy, as if to say, "Shall I speak before him?"

"Most certainly. When he is older he will inherit my task if I have not accomplished it, and it is advisable that he should learn each event as it takes place."

Accordingly, the worthy man sat down and described all the occurrences he had witnessed, the attitude of the crowd, and the dangers he had escaped.

"And Cornevin," interrupted Madame Delorge—"the gooom at the Elysée stables—have you seen him?"

"No—only his wife," replied Ducoudray hesitatingly. He really did not dare to tell the whole truth to Madame Delorge, for fear of frightening her, but she insisted on his speaking, and when he had done so she exclaimed: "Ah! indeed! I expected something like that."

Thereupon, the good man eagerly added that Cornevin would, of course, be back again in a day or two, but she rejoined: "Why do you try to encourage me with hopes which you do not feel yourself? This fellow was too important a witness not to be got rid of in some way or another. Besides, he was all the more dangerous as he was honest. He was watched, of course, and when he was seen coming here his fate was sealed. Circumstances were propitious for his disappearance. What is the fate of one man in such times as these?"

Ducoudray turned pale. "We ought to gather courage and hope, madame," he said, "for the *coup d'état* will not succeed."

"But it will, sir."

"Oh, excuse me; I have spent the whole day in the streets, and I understand the feelings of the people——"

"Nevertheless," interrupted Madame Delorge, "the *coup d'état* will succeed. I have learned a great deal since I saw you last night. I have been looking over my husband's papers. He long since foresaw what has now happened—and that is why he wished to resign before returning to Paris. An unfinished letter in his own handwriting convinces me of this, but, unfortunately, I cannot discover for whom it was intended. 'My friend,' he writes, 'be on your guard—all is ready for the grand *coup*. It may burst forth at any moment—to-night or to-morrow—perhaps at this very moment while I am writing these words. Don't lose a minute. The stupid dissensions among honest men insure success to the first knave who chooses to snatch at power.'"

"And you believe this? You believe that the general's enemies—his murderers—will soon occupy the highest places in the land?"

"I do."

"And yet, madame, you hold to your own plans of—vengeance?"

The poor woman started. "Why should you call justice vengeance?" she asked. "A murder has been committed—I only ask that the murderer may be detected and punished. Is that too much to ask?"

"Alas! madame," answered her worthy friend. "If the *coup d'état* really triumphs, M. de Combeaine will be beyond your reach!"

"That may be so," replied Madame Delorge, "but some very insignificant cause often does the most mischief. The subsidence of a little sand will cause the most solid-looking edifice to fall to the ground. An express train travels swiftly, but a child may have placed a pebble on the track, and the powerful engine rolls to the bottom of an abyss. I may be this stone, sir—this grain of sand."

These words decided M. Ducoudray to beat a retreat as fast as possible—for he felt far from comfortable, and was no longer so determined to devote himself body and soul to the cause of the general's widow. "Dear me! How she talks!" he said to himself. "Heaven only knows what mad acts her hatred will impel her to commit. She is a very dangerous person to have anything to do with. If the *coup d'état* proves a fiasco, as I think it will—why, then I shall side with Madame Delorge against De Combelaïne. But if, on the contrary, it succeeds—well, I can only say that I am too old to sacrifice my peace of mind and body."

The next morning he rose at an early hour, but he still retained too vivid a remembrance of the charge of lancers to venture into the heart of Paris again without having ascertained what was going on there. Accordingly he went out to consult various tradespeople he knew in Passy, where, despite the distance from Paris there now prevailed considerable

excitement. There were rumours of the arrest of several more generals, and of risings at Rheims and Orleans. By ten o'clock Ducoudray could bear it no longer. Remembering that one of his friends resided on the Boulevard Montmartre, he started off, determined to ask his friend's permission to sit at one of his windows and watch the scene. "There, at least," thought he, "I shall be in safety."

The crowd on the Boulevards was as large, and even more hostile than on the day before. Orators were hoisted on to the shoulders of their companions, and held forth in violent language. On the walls there were new placards, which ran as follows:

"The erection of barricades in the public streets is strictly forbidden. People are warned not to assemble in crowds, which will be dispersed by force. Let peaceable citizens remain at home.

"Paris, December 4th, 1851.

"DE MAUPAS.

"Prefect of Police."

M. Ducoudray was momentarily tempted to follow the Prefect's advice and return to Passy, but the remarks he heard about him speedily changed his mind again. "They threaten well," said one young man, with a sneer, "Their bark is worse than their bite. They talk like this, but they will never dare to carry out their threats."

This was also Ducoudray's opinion, and he accordingly proceeded as far as the corner of the Rue des Capucines, where he saw a tall old man—said to be a representative who had escaped arrest—addressing the crowd, and explaining with considerable precision what form the resistance of the people ought to take.

"There are sixty thousand soldiers under arms to-day," said one man in the throng.

"Well fed and with plenty to drink," added another.

"Ay, they are all half drunk," remarked a third.

"Very well, then," said the orator, "let us be careful, and give them no reason for any violence."

The crowd seemed to be curious rather than angry, though when an officer galloped by there would occasionally be a shout of "Down with the traitors! No dictator!" On hearing this M. Ducoudray became triumphant. "Ah!" said he to a neighbour in crowd, "these *coup d'état* gentlemen may shake in their shoes!" and feeling quite reassured he went on towards the Rue de Richelieu.

All at once a loud clamour arose. An officer of the National Guard, galloping at full speed down the street, had turned his horse too short, and the animal reared and threw his rider. A crowd at once surrounded and threatened the dismounted horseman, but some young fellows interposed and hustled him through the throng into an adjoining house.

By this time Ducoudray had reached the abode of the person whom he meant to ask for a window. His friend gave him a cordial welcome, and asked him how things were going. "These *coup d'état* people would retreat if they could," rejoined Ducoudray, authoritatively; "but they can't—they've burned their ships. They really meditated a *coup de bourse* rather than a *coup d'état*. From Louis Napoléon, the president, down to Maumussy and Combelaine, they are all of them impoverished men. What would become of them if they retreated now?"

At this moment the noise of a cannonade so violent and so close that the windows rattled, interrupted his remarks. Both men turned very pale. "Good heavens!" cried Ducoudray, "what is that?"

"Cannons," answered his friend, laconically; then, after a pause, he added: "I have been expecting it, for a very strong barricade has been erected on the boulevard nearly opposite the Gymnase theatre."

There now came another discharge, and they at once hastened to the window. Strangely enough, the crowd below seemed no more moved by these cannons than they might have been by the toy ones at Franconi's circus. No one was sufficiently curious to go and see what had happened. Women and children moved about as on the days of a great review. And yet the crowd constantly had to part to make room for passing litters conveying wounded men. Two o'clock was on the point of striking when from the direction of the Madelaine there came the roll of drums. "The troops! the troops!" cried the crowd. But no one seemed to be alarmed, and, in fact, far from dispersing, the people stationed themselves in rows along the sidewalks, as if a great procession were coming.

However, their sense of security did not last long. The troops, who were commanded by General Canrobert, marched on in a never ending file, and with each regiment came a battery of artillery. The soldiers, so Ducoudray thought, were unusually animated. There was a sparkle in their eyes and a restlessness about their movements as if they had been tipling. Many of the officers, moreover, were smoking. All this time distant cannonading was heard, and the two men at the window could see the smoke from the battery at the top of the Boulevard Poissonnière. They leaned out to obtain yet a better view, when all at once from the head of the column there came a quick fusillade. The people fled in all directions, and still the firing continued. "It is only powder!" stammered M. Ducoudray. "It must be powder! They would never fire like that on an unarmed crowd, on women and children."

A bullet which whistled past him, and struck the wall two inches from his head, cut his words short. More dead than alive the two friends threw themselves flat on the floor. It was quite time they did so, for a hail-storm of bullets now crashed through the windows, riddling the curtains and smashing a mirror and a clock inside the room. Meanwhile above the noise rose the angry shouts of the soldiery: "Shut your windows! Close your houses!"

This lasted for ten minutes. Then came a long silence, followed by frightful shrieks and groans. Finally not a sound.

Some time elapsed before M. Ducoudray and his friend dared to crawl to the window and look out. There were only soldiers on the boulevard now. They were leaning on their smoking guns, some glaring angrily up at the windows, and others apparently stupefied by the scene. On the sidewalks, up and down, lay half a hundred bodies or so, including several women and two or three children. Near the corner of the Rue Montmartre something glittered. A poor little "coco" vendor, who had taken it into his head to offer his beverage to the troops, was lying there with his bright metal filter on his back, pierced with twenty balls. Suddenly a shop door was timidly opened, and some men came out cautiously, picked a poor fellow who was wounded off the pavement, and carried him into the shop. Meantime detachments of six or eight soldiers were going from house to house, and could be seen at the windows of each successive floor. "They are making domiciliary visits," whispered Ducoudray in his friend's ear. "They will come here, too."

And, indeed, in another moment they heard an imperative knock and then loud shouts of "Open at once, or we break down the door."

They hastily threw the door open. The soldiers came in and began to search the rooms, opening every wardrobe and closet, and probing the beds with their bayonets. One of them even took hold of Ducoudray's hands and smelt them, to make sure that he had not been using firearms.

"Oh! could you suppose it sir?" cried the worthy man.

"Could I suppose?" interrupted the angry soldier—"I suppose nothing—I only know that we were fired at from the windows, and those who fired must be found."

Ducoudray was about to speak, but the young lieutenant in command of the men made a sign to him to remain quiet. The officer seemed greatly disturbed. "It is a frightful catastrophe," he said to the two friends, while his soldiers continued their search of the house. "We did all that was in human power to avert this calamity; but our men were like mad. They would hear nothing we said—they even threatened us. Carried away by the recollection of the 'war of the windows' in those dark days of June, they thought themselves surrounded by invisible enemies. Every house seemed full of weapons. Besides, most of the men had been drinking, and at the first shot they went wild——." He said no more, being interrupted by a noise on the upper floor, on hearing which he hastened out of the room.

Ducoudray and his friend were now alone, and they looked at each other in silent consternation, for neither of them cared to speak. It was another tenant of the house, who aroused them. He was very pale, and carried his arm in a sling. Returning home from business just at the moment of the fray he had been wounded by a bullet. "And I was lucky in getting off so well," he said, "for two poor devils were killed at my side."

He then went on to describe what he had seen. He mentioned a bookseller who had opened the door of his shop to the frightened crowd, and who, as a reward, was shot dead in sight of his wife and children; and he related occurrences that had taken place along the line. Several of the cafés had been sacked, so to speak, and the refugees driven out of their shelter. At the Cercle du Commerce several members had been severely wounded, while opposite the Hôtel Sallandrouze he had seen an artillery officer throw himself in front of his guns, and call out to his men: "Now—fire. Thank God the first shot will kill me."

The new-comer also reported that there had been little or no resistance; for none of the barricades were held. When the moment came to defend them, those who had raised them disappeared as if by magic. The troops had only to appear to conquer. And besides, what were a thousand or twelve hundred persons against an entire army?

M. Ducoudray listened pale and trembling, and frequently wiped the cold sweat from his brow. "I must go home! I must go home!" he repeated again and again with idiotic reiteration, and finally about six o'clock he started off. "I was so utterly upset," he said later on in describing his emotions on this calamitous day—"I was really so afraid that I feared nothing." The troops were now bivouacking all along the boulevards. Fires had been lighted, and the flames threw strange, fantastic shadows on the house fronts. The soldiers were eating and drinking gaily, as after a great victory. Wine ran freely, and here and there the blue flame of a punch-bowl could be seen. With these exceptions the city was sad to a degree.

As Ducoudray walked through the deserted streets, he thought to himself: "Who will call, ask after or care a sou about the death of General Delorge, or the disappearance of poor Cornevin? What do two victims, more or less, matter in such times as these?" Still he thought it his

duty to call on Madame Delorge before he went home. He found her with her children, and looking so calm that he thought she knew nothing of the day's fatal events. "Poor, dear lady," he said, "your hopes are all crushed. The *coup d'état* is successful, and M. de Combelaïne is now all powerful!"

IX.

MONSIEUR DUCOUDRAY was right this time. Never within the memory of man had Paris been so sorrowful as on the morning of the 5th of December. The boulevards were in possession of the troops—vehicles were not allowed to pass along them. From the Bastille to the Madeleine, all the shops were closed; and yet—so peculiarly are Parisians constituted—it was scarcely noon when crowds began to collect again. Groups gathered on the sidewalks about the piles of yellow sand covering the pools of blood of the night before. People stood also before the Hôtel Sallandrouze, the front of which was riddled with bullets. But it was before the Cité Bergère in the Rue du Faubourg-Montmartre, that the crowd was most dense. The iron gate was shut and locked, but through the bars some thirty-five or forty bodies could be seen. They were the poor creatures who had been killed the day before, and whose bodies had not been claimed or recognized. Among them were three women. "A most salutary sight!" muttered some apologist for the *coup d'état*, for such were beginning to appear, now that its success was no longer doubtful.

Yes, the French people were conquered, and they hastened to express their opinions through the *plebiscite*, which, when Louis Napoléon asked if he did not deserve a reward, answered by more than seven million ayes against seven hundred thousand nays. Now the quarry gathered round the game. M. de Maumussy was spoken of for a ministerial portfolio; M. de Combelaïne, now more of a count than ever, was appointed to an important and lucrative position, and M. Coutanceau announced the establishment of a great financial enterprise supported by the Government.

No one followed all these events with more interest than M. Ducoudray. He, who usually held his head so high, now went about timidly with his eyes cast down, as if he was eager to escape observation. The secret he possessed in reference to the death of General Delorge weighed heavily on his soul. And when he saw any especially arbitrary or violent measure of the men in power succeed, the very marrow in his bones was chilled. "I trust in Heaven," he said "that they will forget me."

He would perhaps have been less uneasy had he been able to induce Madame Delorge to give up her plans of vengeance. But he failed in his attempts. "The triumph of the wicked will not last long," was her invariable reply. "An edifice, the first stone of which was sealed with blood, must crumble sooner or later."

Then her friend urged her at least to defer any steps until a more auspicious moment. "What would she gain," he asked, "by raising her voice now?" To these incessant remonstrances Madame Delorge finally made no reply. Only, at every meal, the general's place was laid precisely as if he were still living, for she had declared that it should be so until she had obtained justice. "That vacant chair," she said, "will remind us of our duty."

At last, M. Ducoudray began almost to detest her. "She is simply

crazy," he said. "Never in my life did I see such a headstrong creature."

Madame Delorge had penetration enough to see what was going on in the mind of her old neighbour. So she talked less to him of her designs, though she had in no degree relinquished them. She determined, as soon as Paris was calmed down, to make a formal complaint—with what result she could not tell. If an inquest were ordered she would at least learn the name of her husband's adversary, or, as she opined, his murderer. Still up to this time her instinctive belief in the complicity of the Count de Combelaine was supported by no material proof.

However, before she could file any formal complaint she must find the only witness of the general's death. When a fortnight had elapsed after M. Ducoudray's visit to Cornevin, and nothing had been heard from him, she determined to write to the man's wife, and beg her to call upon her. It was on a Saturday that the faithful Krauss carried this letter to Montmartre, and on the following afternoon the groom's wife presented herself at the villa. M. Ducoudray was there, as was his habit at this time of day. Not having been forewarned, he started and grew very red when Krauss entered the sitting-room and informed his mistress that Madame Cornevin wished to see her. Ah! if the good old gentleman could have only gone up through the ceiling or got out of the room unseen. But alas for him, there was no escape.

"Let her come in," answered Madame Delorge, eagerly.

The poor woman appeared with a child in her arms, and it was not necessary to ask if her husband had returned. M. Ducoudray would not have known her if she had not sent in her name, so greatly was she changed by three weeks' sorrow and suspense. She was but the shadow of the youthful, healthy looking woman he had seen in the Rue Mercadet—so proud of her children, and of her clean, orderly home.

Her thinness was appalling; her dark calico dress hung in loose folds over her bust and shoulders, while every drop of blood had left her face. She had wept so much that her eyelids were scarlet, and her tears had worn furrows along her cheeks. As for the child, however, he was as dimpled and as healthy as before. The poor woman's face brightened when she saw the old gentleman. "Ah! Monsieur Krauss," she cried, whereupon M. Ducoudray wished he could fade away.

"You are mistaken, dear madame, you are mistaken," he stammered.

Madame Cornevin looked very much amazed, and then, in a timid way, as if fearing she had made a blunder, she remarked: "Was it not the name of Krauss you gave me, sir? I wrote it down as soon as you had gone."

"That will do," interrupted Ducoudray, "that will do." And then with the sterile volubility of the people who attempted to explain an inexplicable thing, he undertook to justify what he called his little mistake.

But Madame Delorge did not care; she calmed him with a kind smile, and then took a chair nearer Madame Cornevin. "Can it be possible, my poor woman," she said, "that you have had no news from your husband yet?"

"None, madame."

"What have you done?"

"First, I went looking among the dead, and examined the bodies of all the men who were killed; and when, on the 6th of December, a neighbour told me that there were at least a hundred more bodies in the cemetery at Montmartre, I hastened there. It was true; they were laid out in a line, with all but their heads buried. Oh, it was awful to look at! One poor

lady found her husband, though, and nearly fainted. Thank Heaven, mine was not there."

Madame Delorge shuddered. "Then why do you feel sure that your husband is dead?" she asked.

"Because a police agent told me so. You see, madame, I said to myself when I heard of the arrests that were made, that perhaps Laurent might be among them, and I thought that if he were sent to the colonies as a punishment that I might perhaps go too, and then we could be happy again. So I went off to an office where I inquired. They told me to come back in a week. I did so, and then they said that among the arrests there was no person answering to the name of Cornevin."

Madame Delorge remained silent for a moment; she was expressly struck by the woman's persistent conviction that her husband had been killed. "Why are you so sure," she asked at last, "that your husband was in the fight? You told this gentleman the day you first saw him that Cornevin cared nothing for politics."

"I did not know then as much as I know now. It seems that my husband had made some new acquaintances—bad fellows—and they led him astray. He was faithful to his duties and kind to me—but he belonged all the same to secret societies."

"Who told you so?"

"The head groom."

"Did you go to the Elysée, then?"

"Yes, madame, several times."

At this point Ducoudray leaned towards Madame Delorge; he was very uneasy, and he whispered to her that he thought she had better say no more. But she did not take the slightest notice of his intervention, for the decisive moment of the interview had come. "In your place, my poor woman," she continued, "I should have applied to one of his comrades rather than to the head groom."

"I did that afterwards, madame. I sent to his very best friend, a man named Grollet. He was as unhappy as I am, and as soon as he saw me he burst into tears."

"But what did he say?"

"He said that the head groom was quite right, that Laurent had been busy with matters he had better not have meddled with."

Madame Delorge and M. Ducoudray exchanged glances. "And what were these matters?"

"He didn't say."

"Did you hear anything of a duel?" asked Madame Delorge.

"Of a duel?"

"Yes, of a duel, which took place in the Garden of the Elysée, and in which a man was killed."

"No, indeed," was the reply, spoken in a tone of such sincerity that it was impossible to doubt the woman. She evidently knew nothing.

Nevertheless, Madame Delorge was not disposed to relinquish the matter. "Won't you try," she said gently, "and see if you can't remember what occurred the last time your husband was at home? Did he not leave in view of coming to Passy—to see the wife of a general, to see me? I feel certain that he must have told you something of that urgent business."

"No, madame, not a word."

"What! didn't he allude to a man that was killed in the Garden of the Elysée on the night of the 30th of November?"

Madame Cornevin started. "Who was killed?" she asked.

"My husband—General Delorge."

The good woman drew a long breath. She was evidently trying to collect her thoughts, and striving to find any possible connection between the general's death and Cornevin's disappearance. "Do you think, then, that my husband was present at that duel?" she finally asked.

"If there was a duel—which we are much inclined to doubt," said Ducoudray, forgetting his prudent resolutions. "The scene," he continued, "was lighted by a stable lantern which Cornevin held. He alone knows the truth—and if the general said a word when he stood there, your husband must have heard it!"

Madame Cornevin started to her feet with flashing eyes. "Ah! I understand!" she cried. "I see now why Laurent was so sad, and why he did not wish to stay at the stables. He knew everything, and they were afraid of his testimony." The woman's excitement increased as she spoke, and in a tone that Ducoudray never forgot as long as he lived, she added through her clenched teeth: "Let them take care!—those who have committed this crime. I care nothing for life compared to vengeance!"

Even Madame Delorge was dismayed at her vehemence. "Alas!" she said, "my sorrow is like your own——"

"No, madame," interrupted the woman. "If I were alone in the world you might say that—but I have children."

"And so have I—two."

"Yes—but they are your consolation, while mine are my despair, for it was Laurent's toil that put bread in their mouths. And now what is to become of us? Can I earn enough to feed six of us? Even if I were to work night and day it would be impossible. Must I go to the Relief Office and have my name entered? I should be admitted, I have no doubt. But long days of suspense would follow, and we should starve in the meantime. If the baker shakes his head and refuses me credit, what shall I say to the children when they cluster round me crying with hunger? Must I beg from door to door with my children clinging to my skirts? Must I steal?—I can't. I should not have the courage."

Big tears were falling from Madame Delorge's eyes. That same morning she had thought she was the most wretched woman in the world, and now she saw one who was even more unhappy than herself. She took both of Madame Cornevin's hands in hers. "Be calm," she said, "as long as I live you shall want for nothing!"

The woman smiled sadly. She plainly fancied that these words were but the promises born of passing compassion, and destined to be forgotten on the morrow. Madame Delorge detected this, and so in a solemn tone she added: "I swear to you that I mean what I say—that I shall always, as you may need assistance, be ready to render it. I shall never forget that if your husband has disappeared it was probably because he wished to bring me the last words spoken by mine. And I will do more; if you will intrust your dear sons to me they shall be brought up with my own, and as my own."

Again did worthy M. Ducoudray allow himself to be carried away. "Rely on me, too, my poor woman!"

Madame Cornevin doubted no longer, but falling on her knees before the widow, and kissing her hands she stammered: "Thank you—oh, thank you for my children's sake! You have saved their lives. We can never sufficiently evince our gratitude for such goodness!"

"Who can tell?" said Madame Delorge; and then she added: "The time may come when we shall be able to avenge our husbands."

"On that day," cried Madame Cornevin, "rely on me. Tell me what I am to do, and no matter what it may be I will do it. And the children will not hesitate to give their lives if need be. They shall be told each day how they lost their father, and that it is their duty to see that justice is done!"

The two women stood facing each other, holding each other's hands. The general's widow and the groom's widow were bound together by a solemn compact of hatred. M. Ducoudray felt a cold chill creep up his back, and he was very sorry he had spoken, "for they are both mad," he thought—"quite as mad as March hares." And when Madame Cornevin had departed—carrying with her the first instalment of an annuity of twelve hundred francs—the good man undertook to prove to Madame Delorge the utter folly of mixing herself up with the affairs of the groom's wife. She did not argue the point—she listened in silence—but very early the next morning she went out to the Rue des Saussayes to call on Dr. Buiron. He was at home, and recognised her as soon as she entered. He hastened to offer her a chair, thus concealing his own embarrassment and arranging his replies, possibly, to the questions he foresaw.

But she cut his attentions short. "I intend, sir," she said, "to file my complaint at once and apply for an inquest. My husband, you know, has been assassinated."

He started back and immediately exclaimed: "I, Madame—I know nothing of the kind!"

The widow was not surprised. The astonishing cordiality of her welcome had prepared her for this answer. "And yet, sir, the very care you took in writing your account of the event proves that it struck you as being very strange."

Madame Delorge was pale and cold, while the physician was flushed and animated. "I do not know, madame," he said, "that you have the right to refer to a paper which I intrusted to the discretion of Monsieur Ducoudray. What does it matter, however, and what does it prove? Simply that I was deeply impressed by the events of a night so sad for you. Since then I have reflected, and I recognise the blunder I made, for really——"

He stammered and grew confused, and seemed to wither into nothingness under the widow's contemptuous glance. "Would you speak thus," she asked, "if the *coup d'état* had not succeeded?"

"Madame!" he cried, indignantly; and then, with sudden decision, as if, so to speak, he were bent on jumping straight into the mud, he proceeded with considerable vehemence: "You are right; events have unquestionably affected my judgment. The affair is political in all its bearings. Is it wise for me to meddle in it? I am young, and just starting in my profession. I have no experience, and I have a mother to support. Why should I make enemies for myself?"

Madame Delorge rose from her own chair. "That is all you have to say, I presume?"

"Yes, madame, all."

"Farewell! I shall utter no reproaches; your own conscience will do that." And with these words she left the room.

"Poor miserable coward," she murmured on her way out. "Is he afraid? Has he been bought by my husband's murderer?"

She was not discouraged, however, but drove at once to the Rue Jacob, where resided a lawyer, M. Roberjot by name, who had formerly been

employed by her husband. Young—not yet thirty—of an excellent social position—and possessed of considerable property, M. Roberjot was one of those lawyers whose destiny seems clearly indicated early in life. However, he had drawn himself into his shell, and remained there since the second of December, waiting until he was quite certain whether he had better attach himself to the new government or attach himself to the opposition.

He was utterly amazed when he saw Madame Delorge enter his office, and while he handed her a chair he closely scrutinized her countenance. It was with the utmost attention he listened to her, and when she had ceased speaking, he exclaimed: "Madame, I am inclined to believe that your conjectures are only too near the truth. What you say throws new light on this great mystery."

"Do you mean that you have already heard it spoken of?" she eagerly asked.

He at once answered, "Yes."

"Who is talking of it?" she inquired.

"Not the public, madame, for it is stunned by the rapid succession of events—but the people among whom I live, and who are acquainted always with what goes on in Paris. However, I hardly know if I ought to repeat to you what they say."

"Go on, sir."

He hesitated. "First, madame, let me say that I look on all the various reports respecting your husband as absolutely false. It is said that he committed suicide."

"My husband! And why in the name of Heaven?"

"It is asserted that he had made most compromising engagements with both sides—that he had written several letters—most imprudent ones—that, in short, he was playing a double game, and that, threatened with exposure, he lost his head, and ran his sword through his body."

Madame Delorge rose from her chair. "It is an infamous calumny!" she cried. "What scoundrel invented and circulated such an infamous tale?"

"Ah! madame, does any one ever know the authors of the thousand calumnies which circulate through Paris?"

"Go on, sir; what else have you heard?"

"That General Delorge fell in a duel, arising from some dispute about money; a large sum, it is said, had secretly disappeared from the prince-president's private room."

Tears of mingled anger and grief sprang to the poor widow's eyes. "Enough, sir, enough! I can bear no more. Whence come these tales? You do not know, but I do. It was not enough, it seems, to assassinate my husband; they wish to dishonour his memory. But that shall not be—I will appeal to the Press."

M. Roberjot shook his head: "Alas! madame, I doubt if you would find a paper willing to publish a line on your behalf."

Finally, however, at her entreaties, he consented to take her to the office of an influential paper, the editor of which professed to feel an implacable hatred against the government. He listened to Madame Delorge's story with appalling imprecations, but when she had finished he told her that the Press was reduced to absolute silence, and that an allusion to this affair would close their offices. He wished he could help her, but he could not face utter ruin. "And these are the men of to-day!" sighed Madame Delorge as she returned to Passy. But all the same, she duly filed her complaint on the morrow.

X.

WHEN a complaint is filed in proper form it is quite impossible that no notice can be taken of it. Now, Madame Delorge had complied with all the requirements of the law as duly advised by M. Roberjot, who had warmly espoused her cause. This dark and mysterious affair had put an end to his perplexities, and decided his course. Henceforth Roberjot would belong to the opposition, and so, with the greatest caution and diplomacy, he had drawn up Madame Delorge's complaint against some person or persons unknown. Each circumstance which, in his opinion, went to show that a crime had been committed was duly specified—from Krauss's assertion that the general's sword had never been drawn in a duel down to that seemingly overwhelming proof, the disappearance of the unhappy Cornevin. In conclusion, and so that justice might make no mistake, M. Roberjot named the Comte de Combelaïne in a phrase which, although of very meek appearance, was in reality more terrible than any formal charge. "And now," he said to Madame Delorge, "we can do nothing more—we can only wait."

She did not wait long. Her complaint had been filed on the Tuesday, and on the Wednesday her worthy neighbour, Ducoudray, appeared about five o'clock, dressed in black as if for a funeral, and with a face as solemn as his garments. "They have begun," he cried. "The investigation has commenced. I have just come from the Palais de Justice."

Madame Delorge flushed, for, dreading her friend's remonstrance, she had carefully concealed her complaint from him.

"Yesterday," he continued, "while I was at dinner, I received a summons to appear before the investigating magistrate. Shall I confess that I was really disturbed, for I dislike court rooms and judges very much. However, as there was no escape, I went to the Palais de Justice at eleven o'clock this morning, and was at once ushered into the magistrate's presence. He was a man of about my build, with his hair parted down the middle, and a pair of huge whiskers. His face was very pale, and his lips as thin as threads. He returned my bow politely, but he looked at me from head to foot for a good minute. Then he asked me my name, my age, and my profession, and all at once he most abruptly asked, 'And what do you know about the death of General Delorge?' It was then my turn to look at him, and I did so, and folded my arms. 'I know,' I replied, 'that he was assassinated in the most cowardly manner.'"

Madame Delorge started, and looked at her old friend in utter bewilderment. "You said that!" she cried.

"Yes, just that. Ah! I know what you are thinking, dear madame. You fancy that I have changed very much. But that is not so. I am not a hero; I am, in fact, somewhat a coward, but I am hot-headed, and hot-hearted; and to tell you the truth, I spend half my life regretting what I have done in the other half!" Quite pleased with this explanation of his conduct, M. Ducoudray then returned to his narrative. "My reply did not seem to please the judge; for he gave me a vindictive glance, and, in a tone that turned me all goose-flesh, exclaimed: 'You are going a little too fast, sir.' Thereupon I answered dryly: 'If I move fast it is because I have proofs to back me.' To which he simply replied, 'Ah!' After turning over some papers he began again. 'Let us hear these proofs,' he said, and of course I did not need to be asked twice. I talked so fast that he checked

me three or four times—for you will understand that every word I uttered was taken down on paper.”

In his eagerness the good old gentleman forgot where he was; he gesticulated with unusual violence, and jammed his hat down over his eyes, as he continued: “When I had finished, the magistrate coldly remarked: ‘In all this, sir, I can see your own opinion, but I don’t perceive the slightest proof.’ ‘No proof,’ I exclaimed, and I began again. But he stopped me, saying, ‘That will do; I know everything you can tell me.’ His coolness so exasperated me that I lost my temper, ‘I cannot understand,’ I cried, ‘why General Delorge’s widow was forced to file a complaint herself—justice ought to have forestalled her.’ ‘Why are you so sure,’ asked my man, with a frown, ‘that no steps have been taken?’ But I am not such a fool as to be quieted by such a question. ‘I am not sure,’ I answered; ‘but if any steps have been taken they seem to have been very quickly ended.’ At this the magistrate grew angry. ‘What do you mean by that?’ he exclaimed. ‘Nothing,’ said I, ‘nothing at all, only if the *coup d’état* had not succeeded my friend’s murderer would, no doubt, have been discovered ere now.”

At this point M. Ducoudray drew a long sigh, and shook his head in a dismal fashion, “I said those very words,” he continued, “and I actually shivered at my own audacity. But my thrust had reached home—for the magistrate’s icy coldness left him. ‘Take care, Monsieur Ducoudray,’ he hissed, ‘take care! people who are lacking in respect to those in power are punished severely!’ I wanted to reply; but I heard the gendarmes in the passage outside, and so I dropped my head a little, and assumed a meek attitude. ‘Monsieur Ducoudray,’ continued the magistrate, ‘you must learn that there is no human power that can prevent the course of justice. I should not hesitate to issue a warrant for the arrest of the prime mover in this *coup d’état* if I thought him guilty.’ This sounded very well no doubt, but I knew it was all nonsense. However, I determined to keep this opinion to myself. My evidence was read over to me, and I listened to it with considerable horror, and after I had signed it the dignified magistrate gave me permission to retire. Before I had done so, however, he said to me: ‘Remember that we keep an eye upon you!’ whereupon, I bowed, and came straight here.”

Madame Delorge extended both hands to her visitor, and exclaimed in a feeling voice: “You are a good friend and a good man. Forgive me for having misjudged you.”

But he did not press his lips to her hands. He drearily shook his head. “You judged me correctly,” he answered, “and you owe me no gratitude whatever. It was merely my own folly that made me speak. But what is done is done. And, now, here I am a declared enemy of the government, which has its eye on me! What do you think of that? It was a very different thing to be in the opposition in Louis Philippe’s time.” He paused for a moment, and slightly shuddered as he mentally recapitulated what had occurred. Then raising his voice again, he said, “Well, they may push me to the end if they choose, I won’t retract a word—I’ll stand to my guns. To-night I am going to Madame Cornevin’s which will be a Godsend to the spies who are told off to watch me. Yes, I’ll go, and carry her help and consolation. Yes, madame, you agreed to assume the expense of educating the eldest son, and I’ll do the same for the younger one. That’s settled—and you may be sure I shan’t make the boy an admirer of *coups d’état*—but I must go, so good-night, madame.”

Had the worthy man remained another half hour he would have seen a summons served on Krauss, and have witnessed the terror of the old servant, who was more appalled than if a dozen muskets had been levelled at him. He at once took the paper to Madame Delorge. "What am I to do?" he asked.

If his mistress had told him to say that he had, with his own eyes, seen the general murdered by M. de Combelaïne, he would have done so, without hesitation. "You must tell the truth Krauss," she said, "and only the truth. But you must not allow yourself to be intimidated."

"I'm not afraid; I only want the murderers to be punished," he rejoined. However, he was by no means easy in mind when he set out for the Palais de Justice, and on his return he seemed utterly crushed and dispirited.

"What did they say to you, Krauss?" asked his mistress.

"Not very much."

"Did they ask about the sword?"

"Indeed they did; and the magistrate even sent for two fencing masters, and asked them a lot of questions. At last they told him that in a regular duel the swords must strike each other, but that in a sudden fight it might be different."

"Then what did the magistrate say about my husband not being able to use his right arm?"

"He said that the discussion of that point would be reserved."

After this Madame Delorge did not know what to think. "Will they examine me?" she asked herself; and then she added: "If that magistrate is honest, and will listen to me for ten minutes, there will not remain the shadow of a doubt in his mind."

"But he will not listen to you! It is a political affair—and we are on the losing side," objected M. Ducoudray, who was, however, much mistaken.

On Wednesday, Madame Delorge received a summons to appear on the following day at a fixed hour, and to take her son with her. Why was that? What did they hope to extort from this lad of eleven? Could he say anything that could be used against his father? This fear prevented the poor woman from sleeping, and induced her to repair to M. Roberjot's office, with her son, before going to the Palais de Justice. The *valet* who opened the door said that his master was at home, but very much engaged with several journalists. "Never mind!" she answered; "I will wait. Take him this card."

The servant thereupon raised no further objection, but showed the widow and Raymond into a small sitting-room. A very thin partition separated this apartment from the lawyer's private office, and as the door was partially open Madame Delorge could not only hear but see. There was a heated discussion going on, and big words and phrases, such as "Resistance"—"Vindication of the rights of the people," and so on were frequently being used. It was quite clear that M. Roberjot was preparing himself for the next elections. Would he condescend to attend to a client at such a moment? It was doubtful, she thought; but in point of fact he soon appeared, having dismissed his political friends.

She raised her eyes to his face and was infinitely astonished at what she saw. The happy, contented lawyer whom she had met at the first interview had seemingly disappeared, and given place to a politician. M. Roberjot had grown ten years older—there were wrinkles on his brow, and his hair and beard were cut differently. Once so careful in his dress, his

clothes were now shabby and old, and his whole person indicated ambition. His eyes were contradictory, for they had a quiet disdainful gleam, which at times seemed to mock the hollow phrases on his tongue. He hurried Madame Delorge into his private office, and taking the summons she handed him, he read it carefully through. He frowned as he finished. "Ah!" he said, musingly, as if answering certain mental objections. "So Barban d'Avranchel has had his finger in this!"

Madame Delorge had noticed his name on the paper. "How will that affect me—for good or evil?" she eagerly asked.

"I hardly know. M. d'Avranchel is an Orleanist, and must be furious at the way things are going. However, a man's conscience is often led far astray by ambition; but he has always been looked upon as a man of probity."

"Then why, pray, ought I to regret that he is connected with with the matter?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. "The truth is, this gentleman is not popular as a magistrate. He is cold and hard, and always strikes me as one of those men who put on an air of great solemnity to conceal their deficiency of brains."

Madame Delorge felt her heart sink. Of all misfortunes, there is none worse than to have to deal with a dull, obstinate man. "Another thing troubles me, sir," she said: "Why does he order me to bring my son? Do they wish to make him say something which he might regret in later years?"

The lawyer looked at the boy's intelligent face. "Master Raymond," he answered, with a smile, is far too clever for M. d'Avranchel." And taking the lad's hand, as he spoke, he drew him nearer to his side. "You are not easily abashed, are you?" he asked.

"I am not timid," the boy replied, in a low, steady voice.

"Then it will all go well. An examination, you know, need only terrify those who have anything to conceal." M. Roberjot now rose, and though he continued to speak to Raymond, his words were evidently meant for the mother. "Remember that you are neither to feel nor show any fear when you enter the magistrate's presence. Look him full in the face—listen to his questions, and don't answer them hastily—take time to consider well—and if you do not understand them perfectly, ask to have them repeated. Let your replies be as concise as possible. When he asks you anything which you can answer with a simple yes or no, confine yourself to that. If you are in doubt, say you do not know. No ifs, or buts, or supposes; mind and avoid all air of argument or dispute."

Thus warned and advised, Madame Delorge and her son started off for the Palais de Justice. When she gave her name to the attendant, he politely exclaimed; "This way, madame; M. d'Avranchel is expecting you." The young man's attention was marked, but she was not quite sure that she liked it.

The room which she was shown to was small and very dingy. A ragged carpet covered the floor, while opposite the door stood a mahogany desk, and on the right hand side a table at which a clerk was seated. M. Barban d'Avranchel stood near the chimney-piece. He bowed stiffly and pointed to an arm-chair, but did not speak for a moment or two, and when finally his lips parted it was only to ask: "You are Madame Delorge, née Lespéran, are you not?"

"Yes, sir,"

"Give me your name in full, your age, the place and date of your marriage, the number of your children, and the date of their birth."

Madame Delorge obeyed, and the clerk took down all these particulars. The magistrate, who had installed himself in his arm chair, then turned to Raymond. "Come here, my young friend," he said, adding as Raymond approached him: "Your father, I believe, suffered in one of his arms?"

Standing where he did, Raymond could not see his mother, so he instinctively turned towards her, but the magistrate coldly remarked: "It is not in your mother's eyes that you are to read your replies, but in your own memory. You heard my question. Now answer it."

"Yes, sir; my father's right arm hurt him very badly."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he could not use it. When he gave me my fencing lesson he always used his left arm."

"But was not that to teach you to defend yourself against a left-handed adversary? Perhaps he was left-handed himself?"

"No, sir—I know he was not."

"How do you know it?"

The boy thought for a moment; he had not forgotten M. Roberjot's instructions. "I am sure of it," he answered, slowly, "for papa tried several times to take his foil in his right hand, but he was obliged to drop it, saying, 'I can't, it hurts me too badly.'"

"You mean that it gave him great pain to put himself on guard and hold the foil in his right hand?"

"Yes, sir."

Madame Delorge understood only too well what the magistrate was leading up to, and so she eagerly said: "Allow me to explain, sir."

But the magistrate immediately silenced her. "I beg you not to intervene, madame; it is your son who is now under examination, not yourself." And turning again to Raymond: "So that being the state of the case—your father could not always use his right arm as it pained him, but still it was possible for him to do so?"

The boy became indignant on finding that such a meaning was given to his words. "I did not say that, sir," he replied. "I said that he often tried to use it, and couldn't—and that is very different."

The magistrate did not speak—he seemed busy with some papers on his desk. When he had found what he wanted, he turned to Madame Delorge. "Your servant, madame, one Krauss by name, informed me that the pain the general suffered in his arm was greater sometimes than at others—according to the season."

"Yes, sir, according to the temperature. The day my husband was killed, he suffered more than usual."

"That very morning," interposed Raymond, "we were firing at a target and he could not even lift his pistol in his right hand."

Inexperienced as Madame Delorge was she perfectly realized that the whole matter turned upon this point. "When, in compliance with my request," she continued, hastily, "the commissary of police called at my house at Passy he was accompanied by a physician, who at once examined my husband's body. He must have seen the wounds which my husband received on his arm at Isly when——"

"He did see them," interrupted the magistrate "he has described them also—and I will read what he says;" and so saying he took up a paper. "On the right arm three scars, which might impede the motion of the muscles—but to what extent it is impossible to determine."

"Madame Delorge uttered an indignant exclamation. "What! Is that

all he says?" she cried. "But the scars were terrible ones; one of them alone commenced at the shoulder and extended as far as the elbow. I shall ask for an examination of my husband's body."

Her excitement was increasing, but the magistrate silenced her. "That will do," he cried, authoritatively. "The question is easily settled. The general wore his sword on his left side, and which hand did he use to draw it? Why the right one? I have the evidence of three officers who, since he was wounded, have often seen him do so, and do so on horseback, too, which enhanced the difficulty of the movement. General Delorge's right arm was stiff unquestionably, and in a duel he would probably have used his left one but in a sudden gust of passion, having drawn his sword, as was his habit, with his right hand, he continued to use it regardless of pain, and, in fact he attacked his adversary with it. I use the word attacked advisedly, for I have been informed that he was the aggressor."

At this unexpected charge Madame Delorge flushed crimson. "My husband was murdered, sir," she cried; "murdered—do you understand—and I know by whom."

The magistrate frowned. "Not another word, madame—not another word. You forget that if there be an offence greater than that of leaving a crime unpunished it is that of accusing an innocent person. Justice has neglected nothing in searching for the truth, and we have obtained it. I am, indeed, now about to lay it before you in detail." So saying, he rose, and approaching the chimney-piece, leaned against it. "Your complaint was entirely superfluous," he added, "and it is well you should know so, It was on December 1st that the Commissary of Police at Passy called at your house."

"I sent for him, sir."

"That makes no difference. He and the physician with him were afterwards examined, and a legal inquiry was ordered. You see that Justice never slumbers. Even in these dark and troubled days, when human passions run riot, Justice still watches with her hand on her sword, and as unmoved as the rock beaten by the tempest." M. d'Avranchel stopped short—he had forgotten where he was. "Madame," he resumed, in a scarcely less pompous tone, "on the 5th of December I began investigating this mysterious affair, and to-day, after six weeks' laborious toil, I have torn away the veil that shrouded it. Urbain," he added to his clerk, "bring me the report which I told you to copy yesterday."

The clerk rose and produced a formidable-looking document, whereupon the magistrate, with a stern request to Madame Delorge not to interrupt him, began to read it aloud.

XI.

"On the 30th of November, 1851, at twenty minutes past nine o'clock in the evening, General Pierre Delorge left his residence in the Rue Sainte-Claire, at Passy. He was in full uniform, and wore his sword and his decorations. His servant, Krauss by name, closed the door of the cab No. 739, which drove to the Rue de l'Université, to the house of a retired officer, Colonel César Lefert. What took place there is not known, as Colonel Lefert has left France in consequence of the events of December 2nd. It is only known that General Delorge left the colonel at ten minutes past ten o'clock, having been with him precisely twenty-five minutes, and entered

his cab again, bidding the driver take him as rapidly as possible to the Elysée Palace. The driver states that the general was very excited and disturbed. He reached the Elysée at half-past ten, and found several people there—officers, deputies, and members of the diplomatic body—one of whom Fabio Farussi, who was well known to the general, has been examined by us. Eight or ten ladies were also present but the prince president was absent. After paying his respects to Madame Salvage, who does the honors of the palace, General Delorge went round the rooms and spoke to such of his acquaintance as were there. He was so pale that every one noticed it, and some even asked him if he were ill. His lips trembled—as Monsieur Fabio Farussi states in his deposition—and his eyes had a very strange look. He was constantly asking, "Hasn't M. de Maumussy come in this evening? Hasn't M. de Combelaïne arrived?" And each time he uttered these names his hearers were struck by the marked indistinctness of his tone, and it was clear that he had great difficulty in controlling himself. In fact it was impossible for him to converse, and so he went to a card-table and stood looking on at the game. The players also were struck by his peculiar manner; and, when he, himself, began to play, they had to remind him each time that it was his turn to lay down a card, for he kept his eyes fixed on the door instead of on the card-table. This lasted for an hour; when suddenly he rose from his chair and walked away in the middle of a game.

"The Count de Combelaïne had just been announced. The general hurried towards him, and they began to talk with so many gesticulations that every one was surprised. At the same time, however, they spoke in so low a tone, that hardly a word they said could be overheard. 'Let us find some other place,' exclaimed the general at last, in an audible voice; 'we must be somewhere where we can talk freely;' whereupon M. de Combelaïne replied: 'Let us wait until Maumussy arrives—I assure you that he is coming.'

"But General Delorge would not listen. 'If you choose to have a scene here,' he answered, 'so be it—only remember that it is none of my seeking.'

"These words decided M. de Combelaïne, and with the general he entered one of the small sitting-rooms which was vacant. They had not been there three minutes when M. de Maumussy joined them. No one else ventured to intrude, but one or two of the guests were so near the open door that it was impossible for them not to see and hear a portion of what took place. For instance, they suddenly heard the general say: 'You are a villain, M. de Combelaïne—a villain whom I intend to send into another world. You wear a sword—let us go outside.'

"M. de Combelaïne at once replied: 'You know very well that I am not afraid of a duel, but I don't choose to have any scandal. Wait until to-morrow.'

"M. de Maumussy did his best to calm them both, addressing first one and then the other. But the general seemed to have lost his head. 'Come with me now,' he repeated to De Combelaïne. 'You must come now or I shall slap your face here in this room.'

"M. de Combelaïne could bear no more.

"Very well! let us go down to the garden at once!' he cried, and they crossed the room, and went down the stairs."

"Ah! I was right then," exclaimed Madame Delorge. "It was he—it was M. de Combelaïne, who murdered my husband!"

Surprised by the audacity of this interruption, the magistrate raised his eyes and fixed them angrily on Madame Delorge. But he resumed reading as if she had not spoken. "The clock was striking half-past eleven when the two men left the room. Their departure attracted comparatively little attention, for at that moment a young English girl of great beauty, and greater talent, had just gone to the piano, and most of the guests were anxious to hear her. However, several officers started to follow General Delorge and M. de Combelaïne, but they were stopped by the Viscount de Maumussy. Three of these officers have been examined and their testimony is the same. They aver that M. de Maumussy was calm and quite self-possessed, and that he said: 'Don't trouble yourselves, gentlemen—it's a mere trifle. Delorge boils over as easily as a saucepan of milk. I will arrange it myself.'

"Still one of the general's friends, Monsieur Fabio Farussi, insisted on following him. 'Take care, said M. de Maumussy: 'you know that a quarrel becomes more difficult to smooth over with each additional spectator.'

"However, M. Farussi would not yield the point, and he and Maumussy went out together. Their discussion lasted some little time. In fact, a quarter of an hour had elapsed when they asked a lackey in the vestibule where the general had gone. 'Into the garden,' was the reply. They hurried out, but hardly had they reached the lower step, than they met M. de Combelaïne, who was pale and agitated, with a sword in his hand. 'It is horrible!' he cried; 'horrible—and for such a trifle too!'

"What do you mean?"

"Delorge!—I think I have killed him—he threw himself on my sword, and fell without a sound."

"Where?"

"Behind the hedge—there where you see the light.' And throwing down his sword, M. de Combelaïne rushed away as if pursued by an avenging fury.

"Never," said M. Farussi in his evidence, 'did I see a man in such despair.' And, unfortunately, this despair was only too well founded. When M. de Maumussy and M. Fabio Farussi reached the general, they found him breathing his last."

Madame Delorge was listening like a prisoner on the rack, whose stoicism will not even allow him to groan. "I accept all these details, sir," she said, in a choked voice; "but is there one of them, I ask you, which proves that my husband was not assassinated?"

"Enough, madame!" rejoined the magistrate, sternly. "Listen to the rest of this report, and you will see what the law has ascertained." And then he began to read again: "It has been the duty of the investigation to ascertain what took place from the moment when the two adversaries left the room in the palace together, till that, when one of them was found lying dead in the garden, and with this object, before questioning M. de Combelaïne, it was deemed best to collect other evidence. One witness, Buc by name, the lackey who was on the stairs when the two adversaries passed him, stated that what he saw and heard astonished him so much that he remembered every word. The general, he says, was the first to go down the stairs, and at each step he turned with an insulting epithet to M. de Combelaïne—'His insults were so gross,' said Buc, in his evidence, 'that I would have strangled any man who dared to address them to me!'" Two other servants saw them pass and noticed their excited manner, but they heard or remembered nothing of what they said. The general still led the way. Near the

garden door they met the private secretary of the Minister of the Interior, who was struck by their odd manner, and spoke to them, but obtained no answer. He heard M. de Combelaïne say: 'Come, this is preposterous—wait until to-morrow.'

"However, they went out into the garden, leaving the door half open. Hardly knowing why, the secretary approached the steps, and heard M. de Combelaïne call a groom and bid him bring a lantern from the stables. This groom knew the truth, and we have his evidence."

Madame Delorge started up. "Have you found him?" she cried. "Have you found the man who held the lantern?"

"Yes, madame—we have found him and questioned him—and thinking that you yourself might like to speak to him, I have him in the next room. Urbain!" he said to his clerk, "call in the witness."

Madame Delorge was utterly bewildered. "What, is it really so?" she asked in a trembling voice. "Have you found the poor man, whom his wife believes to be dead, and whom she is now wearing mourning for—Laurent Cornevin——"

"I do not know any Cornevin, madame."

"Good heavens, sir—it was he who——"

"It was he whom you mentioned in your complaint; but you were deceived. It was not he who obeyed M. de Combelaïne's summons and ran forward with a lantern, and this point is easily proved, for Cornevin was not on duty that night."

"But I am sure of what I stated, sir."

"Very well, madame; tell me on what basis your certainty is founded."

Rapidly, and with great vehemence, Madame Delorge gave her reasons. But alas!—as she spoke, these reasons, which had lately seemed to her all powerful, now grew weak and tame. Why was she so sure that the man who held the lantern was Cornevin? The only reason she could adduce was that he had come the next day to Passy, and left his address at her house, and that he had since totally disappeared. The magistrate, still calm and cold, allowed the poor woman to flounder about in the sea of perplexity for some time. But at last he intervened. "You must admit, madame," he said, "that there is really nothing in all this which justifies your statement. Carried away by your grief, you have accepted as truths the fancies of a man whose age ought to have rendered him more circumspect. I allude to your neighbour, that extremely ignorant and headstrong person, M. Ducoudray."

From the contemptuous manner in which these words were uttered, it was easy to see that Ducoudray had greatly displeased the magistrate.

"So then," angrily exclaimed Madame Delorge, "we have dreamed that Cornevin has disappeared——"

"Madame!"

"And even-handed, infallible Justice is quite unmoved by this man's mysterious disappearance and the misery of his family."

For the first time the magistrate's impassive face evinced a human sentiment—anger. "The strong arm of the law," he said, "is yet busy searching for Laurent Cornevin. As yet——"

"He has not been found!"

"No, but all goes to show that he was not among those slain on the occasion of the *coup d'état*. We are inclined to believe that he is among those disturbers of the peace who were arrested, and that he gave a false name to put the police off the track."

"Why should he do so?"

"Perhaps from a desire to disconnect himself from his past life. But why should we trouble ourselves about this man—he is nothing to us!"

"Nothing to us!" cried Madame Delorge, and starting up from her chair she continued, "I tell you that this man must be found, for he alone knows the truth, which you believe you know. In the name of my dead husband, in the name of my children, and the Cornevin family, I command you to find this man!"

This was too much for the magistrate's patience. With an imperious wave of the hand, he silenced Madame Delorge and then proceeded: "Not another word like that, madame! Do you know who these Cornevin's are, these people in, whom you interest yourself so much? I can show you the truth if you are ignorant of it." And so speaking he drew from his desk two papers bearing the seal of the Prefect of Police, and handed one of them to Madame Delorge. "Read this, if you please," he added.

She took the document in her hands and read as follows: "Cornevin (Laurent), thirty-two years of age, born at Fécamp. Residing at Montmartre, Rue Mercadet. Married to Julie Cochard—five children. Cornevin has left no good reputation behind him at the various situations he has held as stable boy and groom. He knew his business and fulfilled his duties, but he was insolent and brutal. Found guilty in 1846 of assault and battery, he would have been sent to prison but for the entreaties of one of his former masters. In 1850 he was engaged at the Elysée Palace; he had just left the Marquis d'Arlange, who gave him a very good character, but we all know what that amounts to. At the Elysée everybody began by liking and praising him, but his deplorable disposition for quarreling soon evinced itself, and he was solely kept for his punctuality and experience. In 1851 he suddenly changed; he became the boon companion of a band of rascals, and was an intimate friend of a wine-shop politician, who was afterwards punished for theft. It had just been decided that Cornevin must be sent away, when suddenly he disappeared without a word of warning. His month's wages are still due him."

As soon as Madame Delorge had finished perusing this document, the magistrate handed her the second one which was couched in these terms: "Julie Cochard, wife of Cornevin (Laurent), twenty-eight years of age, and born in Paris. Is looked upon in her neighbourhood (Montmartre) as a good wife and house-keeper, and her morals, it is said, are all they should be—at all events since her marriage. It would be difficult to say precisely what her previous conduct was, for she had plenty of very bad examples among her relatives. Her father was imprisoned several times for theft, and her mother's morals were very bad. Julie Cochard's eldest sister, Adèle, was formerly a ballet-girl, and she is now known in certain society as Flora Misri."

If the magistrate had relied upon these police reports to separate Madame Delorge from the Cornevin family, he found himself egregiously mistaken. She did not indulge in a word of comment—and for many reasons. In the first place, the interest she took in the Cornevin's was independent of all these circumstances. "Cornevin knew the truth," she thought to herself; "the eagerness with which he hastened to me is the cause of his disappearance. Besides, notwithstanding the language used in these documents, what did these accusations amount to? It was said that the husband was brutal and coarse—and why not? If he had received the education of a gentleman, he would certainly not have been a groom. On the other hand the wife was reproached with the conduct of her mother, her father, and her sister, but there was not a word against herself." These reflections flashed through

Madame Delorge's mind, but she in no wise mentioned them as she handed the papers back to the magistrate.

"Who then is the man who held the lantern?" she asked.

"A comrade of Cornevin's," answered the magistrate; "a man named Grollet."

Madame Delorge started. That was the name of the man whom Madame Cornevin had been to see, who had been so kind to her, kept her to breakfast, and elicited from her all the information necessary to play his part. "Ah! Grollet indeed!" said Madame Delorge, replying to her own objections rather than addressing the magistrate.

"Yes, and a very honest man he is, too—loved and respected by all about him. I have made every inquiry, and hear nothing but praise of him. But here he comes, so you can judge for yourself."

The door opened, and, behind Urbain, the magistrate's clerk, there came a tall fellow, who looked somewhat frightened and embarrassed. "Come in, my good fellow," said the magistrate. "Come a little nearer."

Madame Delorge scanned the new comer closely; he had what is commonly known as a good face, with full cheeks, a flat nose, and a large mouth with sensual lips. His eyes alone struck one by their mobility.

"Grollet," said the magistrate, "have the goodness to describe to me the scene you witnessed in the Garden of the Elysée Palace on the night of November 30th."

"Oh! let me think a moment, sir."

"Certainly. Begin at the moment you were summoned."

Grollet twisted the Scotch cap he held in his hands, scratched his head, and then, in a trembling hesitating fashion began: "Well, it was Sunday evening, about half past eleven; I was rubbing down an aide-de-camp's horse when I suddenly heard a voice: 'Hullo, there! Bring a lantern at once!' This may be a means of earning a little money, I said to myself, and so unhooking a lantern, I hastened to the garden. I saw two gentlemen there, M. de Combelaïne, whom I had often seen, and a general, whom I afterwards heard was General Delorge. They were standing so close to one another that their faces nearly touched, and they were calling each other the most terrible names. As soon as I appeared one of them, the general, said—'Here comes a light!' and then stamping his feet, he continued—'On guard! on guard,' Then drawing his sword as he spoke, he made a thrust at M. de Combelaïne, which I thought would cut him in two. But no; the count sprang on one side, and threw out his arm in such a way that when the general lunged he threw himself on his adversary's sword, which entered his side. He did not even groan; but threw up his arms and fell to the ground—"

On hearing this, Raymond, poor boy, burst into passionate sobs. But Madame Delorge did not weep—her wound was bleeding inwardly. "Then my husband did not speak a single word?" she asked.

"No, madame, not one—Ah! yes, I ran to the general and knelt at his side—and he did say something I could not understand, but I thought it was Elise."

This, in Madame Delorge's estimation, was the finishing touch of iniquity. Her husband's enemies had taught her name to this man so as to give an air of reality to his story.

"Oh, this is infamous!" she exclaimed.

"Madame," rejoined the magistrate indignantly.

"Don't you see that this man is repeating a lesson learned by heart? Don't you see that this man is a false witness?" resumed the widow.

"You are insulting a worthy man and justice——"

But she was not listening to him. She had risen and approached Grollet. "Do you dare tell me on your oath that you are not a false witness? Look me in the face if you dare!"

White, and with lowered head, Grollet retreated to the wall. "I have told the truth," he stammered.

"You lie! The man who held the lantern was Cornevin. It was the poor fellow whose friend you pretended to be, and whose wife you welcomed with hypocritical tears. It was Cornevin, I say—and I believe that he himself has since been murdered because he witnessed the crime—and now you——"

Trembling like a leaf, Grollet tried to raise his hand. "I swear," he murmured, "before God I swear——"

"Don't swear," interrupted Madame Delorge. "Tell us, rather, how much these men have given you to purchase your assistance. However large the sum may have been you have thrown yourself away. To-morrow you will realize that each one of your gold pieces is stained with blood. Listen, now, to the voice of your conscience, and remember that the truth will certainly become known."

Madame Delorge had nearly won the day, for Grollet caught his breath, stunned by this explosion of anger and grief, and seemed to shrink into himself. Ah, if the magistrate had been one of those shrewd men who can dive into consciences! But, no. Firmly entrenched behind the belief in his own infallibility, he saw and heard nothing save Madame Delorge's haughtiness and tone of authority, and, irritated by what he considered an assumption of his own prerogatives he exclaimed: "Madame, you exceed all bounds!"

"Ah, sir!" rejoined the poor woman, "if you would only——"

But there was no longer time. Cornevin's old friend had had time to measure the peril he had incurred, and straightening himself up like a drowning man, preparing for one last supreme effort, he exclaimed: "If I were to be burned alive I couldn't tell you more than I have!"

The moment that decides human destinies was past, as Madame Delorge understood; and, dizzy with disappointment, she sank into her arm-chair at her son's side.

The magistrate made a few severe remarks respecting the danger of such passionate outbursts, and declared that he would defend his witness against a repetition of such attacks. "Go on, my friend," he continued, turning to Grollet.

The witness obeyed, and in a more confident tone of voice exclaimed: "When the Viscount de Maumussy, and another gentleman who hastened to the spot, realized that the general was dead, they said: 'We must conceal this terrible misfortune from every one, and more especially from the prince president! What shall be done?' Thereupon I ventured to mention a disused room which I had the key of, and M. de Maumussy quickly answered: 'You are right. Come at once.' We three carried the body into this room without being seen by any one, and for a long time I was left alone with the general's body, as M. de Maumussy and M. Farussi had gone back to the palace to find a physician. They wanted the key, too, of one of the private doors of the Elysée, and they kept on saying: 'The president will never forgive us if he should hear of this!' At about three o'clock in the morning they returned with a doctor, who as soon as he lifted the cloak that covered the general, said: 'My presence is useless—death must have been instantaneous.' Thereupon the gentlemen talked earnestly together, and it was finally decided that the general's body must be taken to his own house before

dawn. However, they hesitated as to which of them ought to accompany the doctor. I was sent for a cab, and when I returned the body was placed in it, and the vehicle drove away. It was then that M. de Maumussy took me aside. 'Grollet,' he said, 'if ever a word passes your lips respecting this night's occurrence, remember that your place, which is a good one, is lost.' Naturally I swore to hold my tongue, except, of course, if the law commanded me to speak. To-day I have told you the whole truth."

"That will do," said the magistrate approvingly; "you can now retire." And as soon as Grollet was gone he turned to Madame Delorge. "You will now admit, madame," he said, "the injustice of your accusations."

The unhappy woman rose slowly from her chair. "You have obeyed the dictates of your conscience, sir—I cannot reproach you," she replied. "The future will show which of us is mistaken. Good morning." And taking her boy by the hand, she added: "Come, Raymond, we have nothing more to do in the Palais de Justice." Thereupon she departed, leaving M. d'Avranchel singularly disturbed.

"If this woman should be right, after all, and we all wrong!" he muttered when he was alone. "In that case I have been successfully imposed upon by villains, and am the dupe of a most successfully played comedy. In that case—but no, no, it is impossible! This woman is mad, and M. de Combelaïne is innocent."

XII.

"EXACTLY what I expected!" said M. Roberjot, when Madame Delorge, who repaired at once to his office, gave him an account of the foregoing proceedings. "And yet," he added, thoughtfully, "D'Avranchel cannot be suspected of connivance."

"You wouldn't say that, sir, if, like me, you had seen that man Grollet ready to fall on his knees—ready to ask pardon and confess everything!"

The lawyer shook his head. "Neither of us, dear madame, are good judges, for we are interested parties and our opinions are already fixed. You must find an impartial arbiter, and give him all the particulars of your husband's death as they have been enumerated by M. d'Avranchel. Lay before him the testimony of all these witnesses who agree in so singular a fashion, and when you have done that what do you think the arbiter will reply? Why, he will tell you, 'Madame, all the probabilities are in favor of M. de Combelaïne.' " He leant his elbow on his desk as he spoke, and then added, thoughtfully: "There's no use attempting to disguise it, these people are strong—very strong."

Nothing displeased Madame Delorge so much as any tribute paid to the sagacity of her enemies. "And so," she remarked in a tone of bitter irony, "you intend to bow down before these strong people?"

The lawyer looked very much surprised. "I don't understand you," he said.

She did not reply, but her very silence was significant.

"So, then, you class me with Dr. Buiron, do you?" asked M. Roberjot. "And why, pray? I am one of those persons who submit to an accomplished event, but who never accept it. The proof of this is that this new government, this government founded on the atrocious crime of the 2nd of December, will find no bitterer opponent than myself." As she spoke he looked at Madame Delorge with a peculiar expression, and then continued, in a voice

which perceptibly trembled: "A week ago I could not have expressed myself so decidedly, for, I will confess it, I was then hesitating. But you came here, and, without your own knowledge, you decided my future."

Then, after taking several turns up and down the room, he resumed: "And yet no one had so many reasons for acquiescing. What have I to ask of life that it has not generously given me? I am still young—I have ample means, and I have succeeded at the bar far beyond my hopes——"

But Madame Delorge was in no mood to notice her companion's strange agitation. One fixed idea had taken possession of her life. "What are we to do now?" she abruptly asked.

If M. Roberjot was somewhat shocked at being interrupted in this fashion, he had the good sense to conceal it. "To do now? Nothing! We must wait."

"Wait for what?"

"For the opportunity which never fails to come to those who know how to wait patiently."

Madame Delorge turned away despairingly. "Alas!" she cried, "every day that passes divests me of one of my hopes. Yesterday I met one of my husband's old friends, and he hardly bowed to me. In a year he will say, 'Delorge!—who's Delorge?' My husband was a noble, a valiant soldier—but will this reputation follow him to his grave? No—those slanders which you yourself repeated to me, will remain like so many stains on his memory. In ten years from now my son will have become a man, and some of those folks who know everybody's affairs, will say, 'Oh, he's the son of General Delorge, you know, who was killed in a duel arising out of some scandalous money transaction.'"

But Raymond started to his feet. "No, mamma, no," he exclaimed; "when I'm a man no one will ever dare to say that!"

The lawyer took the boy's hands in his. "You are right, my lad," he said—"very right; and you, madame, are mistaken—you have everything to hope from time. The general is more to be dreaded now than ever."

"Alas! sir, if I could but believe you."

"You must believe me. The proverb which says, 'The dead are the only ones who never return,' is absurd, for in politics they are the only ones who do return. It would be very easy to rule if we could put persons well under ground as soon as they begin to be troublesome. But a government goes on triumphantly, braves all opposition, and laughs at all attacks; it has its creatures, its judges, and its soldiers; it believes in itself, and finds plenty of people to believe in it as well; but some fine morning somebody wanders into a cemetery, spells out some forgotten name on a tombstone, and utters it aloud—and the sound of this name spoken afresh comes like an earthquake—the government crumbles into dust."

Madame Delorge sighed. "Ah!" said she, "I shall never see what you describe."

"Who knows? When I tell you that there is nothing to be done I don't wish to be understood as advising a cowardly resignation. By no means—for we still have Cornevin."

"Cornevin!" slowly repeated Madame Delorge.

"Yes, for it is on this man that all our hopes depend," continued M. Roberjot. "Has he been assassinated? I don't think so. M. de Combelaine is too wise to risk committing a crime which was not indispensable. But in the recent tumult it was easy to conjure Cornevin away. If he has been arrested, it is our business to discover where he is imprisoned."

"I have thought a great deal about Cornevin myself," answered the widow. "I believe him to be still alive, and I believe he has it in his power to provide me with all the weapons I need for my revenge. With this belief, indeed, I have done my best to attach his wife to me."

"You know her, then?"

"Certainly! and I have agreed to give her a small annuity. The eldest of her sons, moreover, will be educated with my lad, and precisely in the same way." The lawyer looked at his client in such utter amazement that she added: "Was not this a sacred duty?"

"It may be so," answered Roberjot, "but it is the height of imprudence." She opened her lips to expostulate, but he gave her no time to speak. "Do you think I blame you, madame?" he cried. "Most assuredly not. But you must not allow your acts to be known. Help this woman and her family as much as you choose, but let it be done as quietly as possible."

"And why, sir?"

"Simply because if Laurent Cornevin seems to be abandoned by all the world he will soon be forgotten. But to give his wife your support openly, is to call attention to him. Poor and friendless, he could in no way meet his powerful enemies. But as the ally of the widow of General Delorge, he becomes a permanent danger. Oblivion would be his best chance for liberty. Your name written in the prison register against his own means indefinite confinement. The day you received his wife, madame, you double-locked his prison door."

Madame Delorge lowered her head in profound discouragement, for she realised the truth and justice of this reasoning. She saw, moreover, that M. Roberjot's and M. Ducoudray's advice were one and the same. To keep quiet, to work, if work she must, like a mole, underground, was all she could and ought to do. Still the very word wait, made the blood boil in her veins, and there were moments when she could hardly restrain herself. She felt that her own right hand was armed with sufficient strength to enable her to transpire the heart of the man who had robbed her of her husband and her happiness. "My mistake is irreparable," she said, at last; "and to act differently now would be only to add another blunder to the first."

"There is another point to be considered," rejoined the lawyer; "a man like M. de Combeldine with such a past life as his own must have a great deal to conceal. We must discover some of the particulars of his past life. My position will give me certain facilities, and with reasonable adroitness on my part I may find out the truth; but I must first have authority from you."

As this interview proceeded, M. Roberjot's feelings gained the better of him. He gazed fixedly and almost lovingly on Madame Delorge, and, lawyer as he was, he bungled and hesitated in his words. But the widow saw nothing of it, the woman in her had died on that fatal night when her husband's body was brought home. The idea that she could ever love again, that any one could raise his eyes to her, would have seemed sacrilege as it were. M. Roberjot saw that he was not understood, and he came to a sudden determination. "My boy," he said to Raymond, "there are some fine engravings on the table in my drawing-room; will you go and look at them while I talk to your mamma."

Left alone with Madame Delorge, he moved restlessly in his chair, played with his pen, and coughed. He was afraid of speaking the words that rose to his lips, and at last, in view of regaining countenance, he reverted to the business on hand. "I told you, madame, the first time I

saw you," he said, "that your cause was mine, that I had espoused it. You have spoken to me of M. de Combelaine's deposition, which the magistrate read to you——"

"No, sir, you are mistaken—he did not read it to me ; I did not give him time."

"But did you not see that this deposition was of the utmost importance to you? I would have told you the motive which De Combelaine chose to attribute to his duel with your husband."

Madame Delorge sighed. "Ah," said she, "this is another mistake I have made. But this one I can, at least, repair, for I can ask Monsieur d'Avranchel for a copy of the deposition."

Roberjot shook his head. "It would be useless," he answered, "for M. de Combelaine has already spread it abroad."

"And what does he say?"

"He attributes his altercation with General Delorge to a personal private matter. Upon my word, madame, I hardly know how to speak of it."

"I can bear anything, sir."

"Very well, then ; De Combelaine affirms that General Delorge could not forgive his attentions to a certain lady——"

He paused, expecting an explosion of jealousy, but Madame Delorge calmly smiled. "That is absurd," she replied.

"So I said," hastily rejoined the lawyer, ashamed of his own hope.

"It is as ridiculous as it is odious," continued the widow, with the proud confidence of a woman sure of the noble love she had inspired. "M. de Combelaine is really very ingenious in his inventions." She smiled sadly as she spoke, and then added, in a tone of utter contempt : "And does any one know who that lady may be?"

"Yes—she is a very pretty person—very well known—and is said to have spent De Combelaine's money very freely."

"I thought he had none to spend."

"So did I ; but people who are better informed than myself say that he was beggared by this very Flora Misri."

"Flora Misri!" exclaimed Madame Delorge—"Is that woman M. de Combelaine's mistress?"

"She has been so for many years, I believe," answered the lawyer, who was unable to understand his client's emotion. "Do you know anything of this woman?" he asked.

"Yes, I know her, sir," she replied ; and emphasizing each word as she spoke, she continued : "This woman's true name is Adèle Corchard. She is the sister of Laurent Cornevin's wife."

Roberjot could not believe his ears. "Are you sure of what you say, madame?"

"Certainly, I am. I heard the name for the first time this morning in the office of the magistrate, who considered it almost a crime on Madame Cornevin's part that she was the sister of such a woman."

The lawyer began to reflect, bringing all his intellect to bear upon this point in view of seeing what advantage he could derive from it. "This woman," he muttered, "must naturally know more than almost anybody else about De Combelaine's past life—probably more than even the Baroness d'Eljonsen knows. But how are we to get at her? How can we open her mouth?"

Madame Delorge did not lose a word of his remarks. "Perhaps we might obtain some information about this woman from Madame Cornevin," she said.

"Do they see each other?"

"Ah! I don't know—I doubt it, however."

"If they are not on good terms, then, a visit at the present moment would awaken suspicion at once."

"But Cornevin's wife is very intelligent."

"No doubt; and then the disappearance of her husband would be a pretext for a renewal of intercourse. But of course De Combelaïne knows that Madame Cornevin and Flora are sisters, and I should not be surprised if he were already on the watch." Roberjot relapsed again into thought, but suddenly he exclaimed: "I must have time to arrange a plan, for one imprudent step would be fatal. I must feel my way. One of my friends is very intimate with the Baroness d'Eljonsen, and, I am sure, he can tell me something which will be useful."

"The Baroness d'Eljonsen?" repeated Madame Delorge, to whom this name conveyed no information.

"Yes, she is the lady who brought De Combelaïne up. It is said she was the most faithful of all the prince-president's friends when he was in exile," replied the lawyer, and then he added, in a tone of calm firmness: "Come what may, madame, you can rely on me. I will do all that human ability can do—only——" he hesitated—"only you must allow me to call on you, for urgent circumstances might arise——"

Madame Delorge did not allow him to finish. "Is it necessary, sir, for me to assure you that you will always be welcome under my roof?" She rose as she spoke, for she had heard some one walking about impatiently in the waiting-room. "I beg your pardon, sir," she added, "for having kept you so long;" and calling Raymond, she drew her long widow's veil over her face and took her leave.

"Ah! that woman knows how to love," muttered the lawyer with a sigh; and then, as if feeling the need of air, he threw open the window and glanced down the street. He was looking for Madame Delorge, and he soon saw her cross the pavement in the direction of her cab, enter it, and drive rapidly away. Clients were waiting for him in the next room; he had heard them, but he did not care—he still leaned on the window-sill, insensible to the cold, and oblivious of everything around him, for he was wrapped in one of those reveries which absorb every faculty.

M. Roberjot was by no means an inexperienced or a simple man. In common with most lawyers, he had had many young and attractive clients, of whom more than one had said to him with tearful eyes: "You are my only hope and reliance! My honour, my happiness, my very life depend on you." M. Roberjot had done much for these fair clients, but never before had his own heart been touched as Madame Delorge had touched it. His life was entirely upset—all his ideas were modified—a new horizon seemed offered to his gaze, and he hardly knew himself. "Can I be in love?" he asked himself, without realizing that those words were at once question and answer. In love—he! An old sceptic—a lawyer absorbed in musty books! But the idea which a fortnight earlier would have struck him as the height of absurdity, did not now bring a smile to his lips. Why shouldn't he be in love, and why not with Madame Delorge? Had she not the freshness and modest grace of a girl? Where could he find a more tender heart, united with greater courage and energy, and higher intelligence? Suddenly he started. "But she," he thought; "she will never love me."

He then took a rapid survey of what he called his chances. Alas! he

saw none. A man might triumph over a rival were that rival living; but how could he expect to efface from a woman's heart the memory of a man who was now invested with every superhuman quality? "There is only one way of reaching her," thought the lawyer. "It must be through gratitude. Nothing will touch her like the hope of avenging her murdered husband. Will she not give herself to the man who helps her in that task?"

He became so excited at this idea that he would have liked to call out the Count de Combelaïne that very moment. But a slight noise caused him to turn, and on doing so he saw one of his servants on the threshold of the room. "What do you want?" he asked in an irritated tone.

"There are two clients to see you, sir."

"Let them come back to-morrow."

"And the stout contractor is here, sir, the one who has so many men employed—the one who is interested in your election, I mean, sir."

"Let him go to the devil!"

The servant stood open-mouthed in surprise, for the word election generally produced a very different effect with his master.

"Say that I am very much occupied, and can see no one this evening," resumed the lawyer.

"Then, sir, I must tell M. Verdale——"

"M. Verdale! Is he here as well? Why the deuce did you not say so before? Show him in at once."

This eagerness may be explained by the fact that M. Verdale was the friend whom M. Roberjot had mentioned to Madame Delorge—the one who was acquainted with the Baroness d'Eljonsen, the patroness of the Count de Combelaïne.

XIII.

M. VERDALE was a tall, stout man, with huge coarse hands. He was frightfully common-looking, but by no means deficient either in intelligence or acuteness. An architect by profession, he had obtained the Grand State Prize which enabled him to sojourn for three years at Rome at the expense of the Government, and nominally for purposes of study. He returned to Paris with a portfolio full of plans and drawings, and with the determination to make his fortune as quickly as possible, and not to be over-scrupulous as to the means he used in doing so. Still for ten years he had only pursued shadows. His plans had never left his portfolio. He was still poor, and more eager than ever to become rich. At college he and Roberjot had known each other well, and although their paths in life had become totally different, they still kept up friendly intercourse. More than once had the unappreciated architect, as he called himself, called on his old class-mate for a loan of a couple of hundred francs, or for a word of advice respecting the little business which came to him now and then. However, poverty and disappointment had not changed his nature. He was always gay, impudent, and vulgar, and rattled on in a sort of dialect of his own—composed of professional phrases, souvenirs of classical study, and quotations picked up at the theatres.

He now entered his friend's private room brandishing a long roll of paper. "What's up," he cried, "that you sit here alone and make everybody wait? Have you become a minister?"

"Not yet."

"But you are to be elected as a deputy, if I am to believe report."

"My friends urge me to become a candidate, I admit, but I have not yet decided."

The architect screamed with laughter. "Poor, dear boy!" he cried, "how your shrinking, violet-like modesty must suffer! Cruel friends—sad obligations! But hesitation would be a crime; it is great, it is glorious to sacrifice oneself for one's country!"

Accustomed as he was to his friend's ways, Roberjot smiled, although he was hardly in a smiling mood.

"In short," resumed Verdale, "you feel your stomach strong enough to swallow all the toads and vipers of such a position; you mean to become a deputy? And a member of the Opposition, I presume?"

"Most assuredly."

"And yet you know what Thiers has said—'The Empire is made!'"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. "We will unmake it then!"

M. Verdale took off his hat. "Accept my thanks," he said; "your confidence delights me." And then, in a tone of feigned humility, he added: "No, let it last—this empire—at least long enough to allow me to make my fortune. You will do that for an old friend, I am sure. Just let me make enough money to pay you what I owe you."

"You think, then, that you will grow rich under the empire?"

"I do, indeed; and as there are nowadays some fifty thousand men in Paris who have the same belief, I am inclined to fancy that the empire *will* last!"

"The deuce it will!"

"I don't say that everybody will succeed, but I shall. I am told that the emperor, or the prince president rather, has gorgeous plans. Well, I have some equally gorgeous ones, and we can do a great deal together. Just let him say the word and my portfolio opens. He wants a Paris of marble, and I'm ready to build him a city of palaces! There will be millions spent, and I fancy that a trifle will fall into my pocket."

Verdale had a quick scent, as his friend well knew. "And so," said the latter, "you intend to pay court to the president?"

"Oh! not yet. But I'm gradually creeping near him, through patrons to whom nothing will be refused. The president may have all the vices that are ascribed to him, but he also possesses a marvellous memory. It's only necessary to have said 'God bless you' to him when he was in exile for him to consider that you have a claim on his gratitude."

"But will the folks about him have as good a memory as he has? Won't they influence him?"

"No; I know where the skeleton's hidden!" cried the architect. And then, as if annoyed at his own eagerness, he added: "When I say that I mean I am acquainted with sufficient things to prevent folks from forgetting me. To give you a proof of it, I may tell you that the paper I hold in my hand is the plan of a mansion which the Baroness d'Eljonsen is going to build in the Champs Elysées."

"The baroness going to build! Why, not a month ago I heard that she was in great need."

"Yes, when she was at Rome. But times have changed—so changed, indeed, that M. de Maumussy has commissioned me to find him a suitable estate between the Seine and the Champs Elysées; so changed that M. de Combelaïne wants a plan for a country house; so terribly changed that M. Coutanceau has promised to appoint me chief architect of a building society

which he means to found, with a capital of—I don't know how many millions. So you see these men don't merely know how to conquer, but they know how to reap the advantages of victory as well!"

The lawyer shook his head, and then in a significant tone he said: "I see you are on the road to become a millionaire."

"I certainly am," answered the architect, "only"—and he slightly frowned, and proceeded in a graver voice—"only while the future is mine, the present belongs to my creditors. I am in the situation of a man who has inherited a large fortune which is lying idle and waiting for him at Marseilles, while he himself is dying of hunger in Paris, without a penny to pay his railway fare from Paris to Marseilles!"

Verdale's visit was now explained. "Well," said the lawyer—as if he did not understand——

"Well, my dear boy, it is for you to rescue me from starvation by enabling me to buy a ticket for the express train which will take me from zero to millions. I want eight thousand francs."

"The deuce you do!" cried his friend. "Do you think I'm a banker and have nothing to do but unlock my safe? Eight thousand francs! Why, that's just half my annual income; and not only have I not got it, but I don't know where I could obtain it!"

The architect colored. "And yet I must have it, and within forty-eight hours, too!"

"But what on earth do you want with such an amount?"

"I wish to make a dash with it!"

"Good Heaven! I thought you far above such follies."

"I was so, and that is the very rock which has brought me to grief!"

"What do you mean?"

"Precisely what I say. You are the son of a rich family, and you have not had to learn that fools refuse to recognize talent unless it is set in a rich frame. You have talent of your own of course, and a fair measure of success, but do you fancy that your beautiful apartment, your furniture, carpets, pictures, and books, count for nothing in your success? When clients ring at your bell a stylish man-servant opens the door, and the client who meant to pay you fifty francs for your opinion, says to himself, 'I must make it a hundred, I see, from this valet.' And then when he is shown into your waiting-room and sees the old oak furniture, he mentally adds on a little more; and finally when he enters this room he is fairly dazzled, and before going out he leaves a hundred and fifty francs on your table."

The lawyer laughed.

"I wish to do the same," continued the architect. "I now live on the fourth floor of a wretched house where no one would take the trouble to come to find me. All this must be changed, my friend. The new rule ought to be called the rule of 'dust in the eyes.' So let us throw our share of dust!"

M. Roberjot hesitated. He did not feel willing to flatter the hopes of the unappreciated architect to the tune of eight thousand francs, but to refuse them meant the loss of the assistance he most needed, in carrying out his dearest plans, and indeed Roberjot would have gladly sacrificed far more than this amount to unmask M. de Combelaïne, and throw him, bound hand and foot, at Madame Delorge's feet. Like all hesitating persons, he took a third course. "I don't say you are wrong," he remarked to his friend: "but do you really require the amount you have named? Would not half as much do?—at least for the present? Later on I might do more."

Verdale's eyes gleamed bright with hope. "No," he said; "I need every copper of it."

"But——"

"But me no buts—I've no time to rise slowly. I want to burst forth like a meteor, and I must come up in the night like a mushroom. It is no use for you to point to yourself as an example. You started early in life, and you were pushed by your family. But I'm no longer young, in fact I feel as old as some of the streets I want to demolish. My mother, who was a market fish-woman, wouldn't be of much assistance to me I fancy. You know my position; you know that I am married and have a boy eleven years old, and that on account of my poverty I'm obliged to let wife and son live in the country with my stingy old father-in-law, who reproaches them at every meal with what they eat, and writes to me regularly every month that I am a worthless scamp, and that if I can't get work as an architect, I ought to turn mason!" He was becoming extremely excited, and talked so fast that his friend could not put in a word. "For a long time," he continued, "I laughed at this situation, but now I weep at it. The front is becoming moldy, the walls are shaky, and I feel draughts all about me. It's dreary work living alone when a man has a pretty little wife. My beard is growing white; I am tired of this Bohemian life—in short, tired of creeping along in the ditches. I want to catch you up at one leap. I have as much ability as yourself. I took the grand prize!"

"I admit all that, my friend."

"Well, then—lend me what I ask, and to-morrow I shall have an apartment, to which clients will speedily learn their way when it is shown them by the Baroness d'Eljonsen, by the Count de Combelaïne, and the Viscount de Maumussy."

The lawyer still hesitated. "Why don't you go to the people you name?"

Verdale shrugged his shoulders—shoulders broad enough to carry many a heavy burden. "I'm not quite such a fool as that!" he answered. "Did you ever see a hungry dog give up a portion of his bones? No; these folks would simply send me packing, and withdraw all their influence."

"But, old friend, I haven't got the money—that's the simple truth."

"But you have credit, as the actor said at the Variétés."

"I have a little landed property, it's true."

"And isn't that money? You must sell it at once, for there will never be such a good time as this. Sell it, and you'll thank me for ever. Do a good action and a good stroke of business at one and the same time."

The lawyer demurred a little longer, but gently, like a man who is disposed to yield; and M. Verdale saw this, for his natural shrewdness had grown much sharper during the last few years of struggle. "Come now, my boy," said he, "lend me a helping hand and I'm saved!"

There was a rap at the door and a servant entered with a lamp. The lawyer gave his friend a cool, keen glance. "It's a great service, comrade, which you ask of me," he said.

"I know it very well."

"You have chances of success, I know, but still your calculations may not be realized."

"I know that too."

"And then these eight thousand francs would simply join the three or four thousand you already owe me!"

The architect started and colored. He trembled all the more, as he had believed the victory gained. "You are very hard on me," he stammered.

"Not at all—I simply wish to point out to you what the situation is, and to show you that if I decide to oblige you, I shall do so merely out of friendship."

"And I shall be eternally grateful to you," cried Verdale, enthusiastically.

However this enthusiasm did not seem to touch M. Roberjot very strongly.

"And I, too, my dear comrade," he coldly said, "I'm in need of service also."

"Well, if it's I who can help you—you may rely on me!"

"Take care—perhaps for the sake of obliging me you may be compelled to disoblige the persons you just named to me."

It was almost impossible to ascertain from the lawyer's tone whether he was in jest or in earnest. But Verdale at once replied: "I shouldn't hesitate a single moment—I should do what you desired."

"And yet you like these people?" remarked Roberjot.

"Yes, I like them, as a man likes the stairs that takes him to the woman he adores!" It was clear that the architect looked at things with eyes of the present day, and neither his convictions nor his principles would occasion much trouble. "Come, now, Roberjot," he exclaimed, "you have something on your mind—you distrust me?"

"No, certainly not!"

"Then out with it—how can I serve you? You have a grievance against one of the persons whom you call my friends?"

"Precisely."

Verdale's face darkened. "It's a great pity," he said, hesitatingly—"still I was your friend before I was theirs—so—so open your heart to me!"

M. Roberjot had only wished to test his friend, and it seemed to him that the result was not quite the thing. He was struck by the semi-reluctant tone in which Verdale had just spoken, and he asked himself if the architect hesitated before having the money what might he not do later on? M. Roberjot concluded that unrestrained generosity would be the best card to play; and so stifling a sigh: "My old comrade," he said, with apparently sincere emotion, "I'm not in the habit of being paid for the favours I do my friends—and in proof of it, I promise to give the sum you require within forty-eight hours, and without any condition whatever."

The lawyer's intuition proved correct—the architect was quite touched. "Show me at any time how I can serve you," said he, "and you may count on me. What am I to do—shall I quarrel with any of these men? Say so, and I'll do it instantly. With eight thousand francs the future is mine. Instead of being a government architect, I'll belong to the opposition. Now I call that a good idea!"

M. Roberjot smiled. "There you go!" he said; "just as you always do. Do you know what I was going to ask? Only for a little information respecting M. de Combelaïne."

Was the architect satisfied with this explanation? At all events he replied: "Information! Well, you shall have it in full and in detail."

At this moment a servant appeared to remind his master that dinner was on the table, and was growing cold. "I'll dine with you Roberjot!" cried Verdale; "and after dinner, over a bottle of your good Burgundy, I'll talk to your heart's content."

They took their seats at table; it was many years since Verdale had been so gay. He already felt the eight thousand francs in his pocket—and ambition, hope of success, with the juicy viands and generous wines, excited him to an unwonted degree. "Now, then," said he, when the dessert was served, "what do you want me to tell you about De Combelaïne? But how

can I talk of him without speaking of the Baroness d'Eljonsen? I must first say a few words of her. When I first knew this estimable lady it was in Rome, where I had been sent by our government. I was introduced at her house, and she did me the honor to take a fancy to me. If I had had any money, she would have borrowed it, but I had none, unfortunately for both of us. However, one day, after exacting from me an oath of eternal secrecy—an oath which I violate for you—she condescended to ask me to take some of her jewels to a pawnshop in the Eternal City. How old is she, you may ask? Upon my life I don't know—at least, not within twenty years. She may not be fifty—she may be over sixty. She is without her equal in ability to repair the ravages of Time. It was a secret she bought in London of some famous enameler there. For half a century no one has ever seen her as God made her. She must sleep in her paint as some great generals sleep in their boots and spurs. People are ignorant of her real position in the world as of her years, but I know that she is deep in politics. This woman is in fact one of those cosmopolitan intriguantes who are ready to do such dirty work that it would appall an ordinary spy. How many persons has she betrayed in her time? How many has she bought and sold?"

"A cheerful portrait, upon my word!" muttered the lawyer.

For some reason or other this remark pleased the architect extremely. "I have a happy knack at description, you will admit," he said, with a loud laugh—and, emptying his glass, he continued: "All the world, friend Roberjot, would not speak as freely as I do. Madame d'Eljonsen has a good memory, and it is not a good thing to have her for an enemy. Those who know her best hold her in great fear."

"Nonsense!"

"No, not nonsense at all. It may be cowardly, it may be petty; but so it is. For fully forty years there has not been a handful of mud thrown anywhere in Europe without her having a finger in it. After all, I think such people have their merits. We know what to think of her and we don't always know what to think of our relations and friends. She knows any amount of things. She has several times forgotten herself in my presence and thought aloud. She knows the answers to a host of enigmas which history, despite all its spectacles and microscopes, will never be able to decipher. And this is why she will always hold her own. When she is hard up she draws some forgotten or hushed-up scandal from her bag, and addresses herself to the interested parties with the simple words: 'Buy, or I publish!' And they buy, of course. This dear baroness is the Muse of Blackmail. She sells a secret when she's in need as other people sell a jewel, and she swears that her resources are unexhaustible, and I am inclined to believe her—for she has served the Russian police as well as the Austrian, and there is not a man of any renown in Europe who has not been received in her drawing-room."

"No, no, not her *drawing-room*."

"Yes—my dear fellow—her drawing-room. You mustn't look on her as a vulgar intriguante. I will show you her portrait, painted when she was little more than twenty; and when you see it you will admit that a woman with such eyes like those is not likely to be fooled. In 1845 she kept a sort of boarding-house in London, and it is whispered that it was not altogether respectable. In 1822 she might have married a German prince who would have placed a coronet on her head."

"A romance," sniffed Roberjot disdainfully.

Verdale stopped short, with a displeased look. "Upon my word, my dear fellow, you really grieve me. How is it that you, as intelligent, as talented, in fact, as you are, can be so suspicious? You are like those persons who, on hearing a story, say, 'No, no, that's impossible, for nothing of the kind ever happened to my laundress!'"

"That may be—but all the same I want facts, and only facts!"

The architect frowned. "In other words, I weary you," said he.

"Very well; I'll content myself with answering. Now, question me."

However, this little spurt of temper had no effect on the lawyer—he calmly proceeded to ask questions, as had been suggested. "First, tell me precisely who Madame d'Eljonsen is?"

In the monotonous tone of a schoolboy reciting a lesson, Verdale replied: "French by birth—belonging to an old family in Brittany—noble and poor. Her father lived in a château—so dilapidated that even the rats had deserted it—about three leagues from Morlaix. Mademoiselle de la Roche-du-Hou was about twenty when she made the acquaintance of a very wealthy Swiss merchant, M. Eljonsen, whom business and ill-luck had brought to Morlaix. In three winks he asked her to marry him. The date of the marriage is not known precisely. However, she followed her husband, of course, and they lived at Riga—the centre of his commercial operations. Their union was by no means happy. M. Eljonsen seemed to be overwhelmed with grief at having married this beauty, and in less than a year he died, leaving his widow a fabulous fortune. It is not on the books that she wept, but she left Riga, where she was frightfully bored, and adding a 'd' and an apostrophe to her husband's name, with the title of baroness, she established herself at Vienna. She lived such a prodigal life there that in three years she was not only ruined, but she was pursued by her creditors, and threatened with several actions. She finally ran away and went to Switzerland, and thence to London, Munich, and Naples."

"But where does M. de Combelaïne come in?"

"I am getting to him," answered M. Verdale. "Now that you know the lady, I wish to say that wherever she went through Europe she took with her a boy named Victor, whom she seemed to adore."

"Her son, I presume."

"So people said—but they were mistaken. Madame d'Eljonsen cannot dissimulate—and if Victor had been her son, she would have said so. No, she simply announced that Victor had been entrusted to her care. By whom? Ah! that's the mystery. Some persons believe that his mother was a great lady—as they say on the stage—while others think she was a London girl of the middle classes."

"But what do you think?"

"I? oh! nothing."

"But still——"

"I know many things," said the architect, with a smile, "but I don't know everything. All that I can state with certainty is that this boy became the Combelaïne who seems to interest you so much."

Roberjot was no longer impatient. "And this name of Combelaïne—where did it come from?" he asked.

"Ah! that's another story, too. Madame d'Eljonsen, as I have said, is a very clever woman, but she is mortal like the rest of us. For very many years she had a weakness, and this weakness was called the Count de Combelaïne, who was a most excellent gentleman, but literally penniless. It was at Vienna that the baroness first met him, and after that they never

parted, at least as long as he lived. When young Victor was about to enter the world the count said to him, 'You have no name, take mine, it has been born by honest gentlemen and brave soldiers; so take it, and may it bring you good fortune.'

M. Roberjot made a gesture to impose silence on his friend, for a servant was entering with coffee and liqueurs; but as soon as the valet had retired, the lawyer said; "And now let us have the history of this lady's adopted son."

But the brief interruption seemed to have wrought a change in the architect's mind; his fluency seemed to have deserted him now that M. de Combelaïne was the person under discussion. "You cross-examine me as if I were a witness in a court of justice," he answered.

The lawyer tried to conceal his annoyance. "In other words—you now think it more prudent not to say any more."

"My dear fellow, this Victor de Combelaïne is a most dangerous fellow."

"Of whom you are afraid?"

Verdale shrugged his shoulders. "Yes, I am afraid of him, but only on your account, for I think you have some folly in your head. Look out what you do, for Combelaïne is not to be trifled with. You know he has killed five or six poor devils in as many duels."

"Why do men fight with such a fellow?"

"People fight with him, because while there are plenty of scandalous stories about him afloat, nothing is known with certainty."

Roberjot grew impatient again. "You promised me your assistance," he said; "if you wish to withdraw that promise, say so."

"I have no such desire. If I seem evasive, it is simply because I am endeavouring to find some means of being useful to you. But how can I hope to do so as long as you tell me nothing of your intentions, nor of what you are driving at?"

"It is not my secret," answered the lawyer.

The architect pricked up his ears. "Ah! there's a secret, is there? Then mystery and discretion. I will continue. This name of De Combelaïne, which is not the man's own, appears to be his only patrimony. I say appears to be, because there is really something else which justifies all the romantic legends of his birth. I allude to a certain mysterious protection which has been extended to him ever since he became a man. It obtained him a captaincy in the army which neither his means nor his conduct justified. Overwhelmed with debts, he was constantly doing things which would have caused the dismissal of any other officer in the service. However, he at last abused his privileges to such an extent, that one day he was compelled to send in his resignation, after swearing he would blow out his brains."

"In what year did that occur?"

"Upon my life I don't know. But it can be easily ascertained." Thereupon the architect laughed and continued: "I have nearly finished," he said. "For to follow De Combelaïne after he left the army would be as foolish as to try and follow a Will-o'-the-wisp."

"But how has he lived?"

"By his wits! Madame d'Eljonsen has come to his help several times—and during the last few years a woman, whose lover he is, has also greatly assisted him."

"Do you mean Flora Misri?"

"Precisely. It is said that she has lent him enormous sums with the security of a first mortgage on his lucky star."

The advocate thought for a moment. "And yet," said he, "this man nowadays has weight and influence. It is incredible!"

Verdale nodded. "I really don't see why you are so much astonished. Have you ever conspired, Roberjot? No—very well! However, if you ever do you will realize that such matters cause a man to make some odd acquaintances."

"I don't understand you."

"I simply mean that Prince Louis—our president of to-day, and our emperor to-morrow—has a very great many acquaintances." It was clear enough that the architect knew very well what he was talking about. "The president," he continued, "would perhaps now be glad if he did not possess so many good cousins. But a man can't conspire unhelped, and if he loses his memory his old acquaintances are apt to call on him and say, 'You remember me; I was at such a place with you.'"

M. Roberjot felt he had gained little by this desultory information—he had allowed himself to indulge in the insane hope that he might obtain from Verdale some startling revelation which could be utilized at once; but the result was very different. Perhaps the architect knew more. Indeed, no doubt, he did; but there seemed little or no prospect of loosening his tongue any further. However, the lawyer was not the man to break his word. "Come in to my private office," he said to Verdale, "and I'll give you what I promised."

The architect turned pale with joy. "Ah! you are a friend, like there are few in this world!" he cried.

And it was quite true—for Roberjot at once handed his friend the title deeds of the estate he meant to sell, at the same time giving him a letter to his notary, as he was far too busy to attend to the matter himself. Verdale was not displeased at this, but contemplated with respectful admiration the paper which represented a fortune. Up to this moment he had been tormented with doubts, hardly daring to believe in his own good luck; but now, without the least request for a security, he was presented with the eight thousand francs which would enable him to realize the millions he dreamt of. With a grateful impulse he grasped his friend's hand and cried: "I shall be a millionaire and you will be a deputy—*tu Marcellus eris.*"

XIV.

"Yes, I shall be a deputy," said M. Roberjot to himself. "It must be so, for it is really the only way I have of getting at De Combelaïne."

For the next few days he occupied himself about his election with feverish activity. He was more than once disgusted—as Verdale had prophesied—but he closed his eyes and thought of Madame Delorge. "For the time will surely come when she will realize her debt to me," he thought to himself.

When the success of his election seemed beyond doubt, he determined to avail himself of the permission she had given him to call on her at Passy. When he reached the villa he found the garden gate open, and in the open space before the house there were two lads taking a lesson in riding from an old man with a gray moustache. For a few moments the lawyer stood looking at the scene; but suddenly one of the lads saw him, and ran towards him saying: "Ah! Monsieur Roberjot, it's you!"

It was Raymond who spoke, and the lawyer shook hands with him, replying, "So you have not forgotten me, my little friend."

"I never forget my father's friends, sir," eagerly rejoined the boy, and beckoning to his comrade he called, "Come here, Léon, come and speak to this gentleman."

Léon complied. He was not as tall as young Delorge, but his shoulders were broader and he was altogether much stouter. He was a little awkward in his new clothes, but there was nothing underbred in his air or manner. "This is Léon Cornevin," said Raymond, "the eldest son of Laurent Cornevin, whom mamma spoke to you about. He has been here a week, and we are studying together. He is learning Latin at a day-school, as I am far ahead of him in that, but he works so hard that he'll soon catch up with me."

"I promised my mother," said Léon, "that I would do my best to profit of Madame Delorge's kindness."

"We shall always be together," interrupted Raymond, eagerly; "we shall be like brothers, and enter the Polytechnic School together."

"And when we are men," added Léon, in a tone of condensed hatred which was positively startling in a child so young—"when we are men we shall go in search of the cowards who murdered General Delorge and my father."

The lawyer was at a loss what reply to make, when he was relieved from his embarrassment by a carefully-dressed old gentleman who had just entered the garden, and who now advanced, saying with the most gracious air: "Monsieur Roberjot, if I am not mistaken?"

"Yes, sir."

"I would have wagered my life on it. I recognized you solely from the description which was given me of you. I myself, sir, am M. Ducoudray, an old and very devoted friend of General Delorge."

"I know you by name, sir."

"Ah! yes—Madame Delorge has, no doubt, spoken to you about me. She knows my devotion to her and hers. But you are tardy in calling on us, sir. We had become somewhat uneasy. Have the goodness to follow me; Madame Delorge will be delighted to see you. She is just now engaged with Madame Cornevin." And bidding the boys resume their lesson, he led the advocate, who was quite stunned by this flow of words, up the steps. At the top of them he stopped, and pointing to Léon, asked: "What do you think of that boy?"

"I think him a manly little fellow."

"Precisely; he is a lad of promise. With an intelligence far in advance of his age, he fully grasps the immensity of the misfortune which has fallen on him, as well as the extent of the goodness shown him by Madame Delorge. He already has an aim in life!" So saying, the worthy old gentleman sighed. "Ah, why isn't his brother like him?" he added.

"What brother?"

"Why, poor Cornevin's second son whom I have adopted to a certain extent."

M. Roberjot congratulated M. Ducoudray on his generosity, but the latter rejoined, "I am really not the one to praise. It is Madame Delorge. When she looks at you in a certain way she inspires you with ideas which otherwise you would never have. I could not keep Jean with me, however, as I am not married, and so I have placed him at college. He has been there for a week, and in that brief time I have twice received complaints from his teachers. He is not lacking in intelligence, quite the contrary;

but he is indolent, and at the same time mischievous. Not only won't he do anything himself, but he prevents the other pupils from studying. Yet he has a certain talent at drawing—enough at all events, to caricature his professors. He says that before his brother kills Combeldaine he intends to torture him. Ah! he's a nice lad and no mistake."

M. Roberjot was no longer listening to Ducoudray, but wondering at the strange association of these three children so different in temperament and disposition, and yet bound together by one thought and hope. Only a woman could have imbued these lads with such a spirit of revenge, and he recognized Madame Delorge's work.

"Come what may, however," continued M. Ducoudray, "I shall not abandon this boy, although the government scarcely relishes the protection I give him. The powers that be, will, no doubt, do all they dare to compel me to abandon him."

"Don't you somewhat exaggerate matters?" asked M. Roberjot, who was a little startled.

"By no means—I mean what I say. I have proofs of it. I have received letters which don't leave a shadow of a doubt. I am looked upon, and watched as a dangerous man—I am surrounded by spies."

"Oh no!"

"Yes, sir, such is the case. But I am on my guard, and all my preparations are made to start for a foreign land at the shortest possible notice. My trunk is packed, and I have a secret exit from my house, while round my waist I wear a belt full of money at this very moment."

The lawyer did not laugh, although Ducoudray's fears were really very ridiculous. His conduct since his alarm was so great, was all the more worthy of praise. For after all a man's courage is not to be measured by the actual peril he braves, but by the peril he thinks he braves. "However," continued Ducoudray in a feeling tone: "I find my reward in the friendship and confidence bestowed on me by my beloved friend's widow. But one word on this point—we must endeavour not to excite her too much. She is now in her husband's library with Madame Cornevin."

The two men entered the house as they spoke, and made their way to the apartment where the two women sat together side by side, like two friends, engaged in sorting various papers and letters. On seeing M. Roberjot, Madame Delorge rose and held out her hand.

"At last, sir," she said, "I can thank you in my own house for all your kindness to a poor woman who has no other claim to your attention than her misfortunes."

A man of heart and mind suffers intensely on receiving praises which he does not feel to be his due. "Alas!" stammered the lawyer, "I have done nothing, madame, to deserve your thanks," and thereupon he tried to turn the conversation, being eagerly assisted by Ducoudray, who was by no means pleased to hear Madame Delorge speak gratefully to any other man than himself.

"We have had some news," said Madame Delorge, in answer to the lawyer's inquiries. "At least we think we have had news of Laurent Cornevin. We feel certain, at all events, that he is living. Julie," she added, turning to the poor woman at her side, "tell these gentlemen what has happened. They must know everything so as to be able to advise us."

M. Roberjot looked at the groom's wife, and was astonished by her appearance of comparative refinement. Her grief and her daily intercourse with Madame Delorge had done much to raise her above her previous station.

He admired her superb black eyes, the dignified carriage of her head, and her heavy braids of chestnut hair.

As Madame Delorge spoke to her, a flush came to her brow, but she did not hesitate. "My parents," she said, "were very poor, and had a large family. At times they were so discouraged that they did not always act rightly. My father drank, and my mother—God forgive her!—did the same. But it is an awful thing for a woman not to have bread to put in her children's mouths. I don't wish to find fault with my parents; I'm only trying to excuse their children. I was one of four daughters, and the only one who had any chance of a good husband. The others, seeing that there were more blows than bread in the house, left it one after the other. Poor little sisters! they only changed one hard fate for another that was worse. They had shame to endure in addition to poverty. One of my sisters was named Adèle. She was the prettiest of us all; in fact, she was the prettiest girl I ever saw in my life, with her big blue eyes, her fresh lips, and fair hair, which was so long and so thick that the neighbours used to come and see it unbound. She went off with the son of a tenant in the same house—a quarrelsome, tipsy fellow, who had been a year in prison for stealing. I never expected to see her again, but one evening, four years later, I had gone with Laurent to the theatre, when suddenly he touched me on the elbow. 'Just look,' said he, 'at that girl in the corner of the stage.' I looked, as he told me, and I started. 'Why, I believe, it's my sister Adèle,' said I. This girl was playing the part of a water-nymph, and on referring to our programme we read the name of Flora Misri."

Somewhat surprised at the turn this narrative was taking, M. Ducoudray and M. Roberjot glanced significantly at one another. However, Madame Cornevin proceeded: "This name, Flora Misri, first threw us off the track. 'We are mistaken,' said my husband, 'it isn't your sister.' I dared not contradict him, because the change was so startling. When I had last seen Adèle she wore shoes down at heel, and a dingy calico dress, while this Water-Nymph had a most dazzling costume of satin and gold, with jewels in her hair, and shining boots. And yet the more I looked at her the more certain I felt that it was Adèle. 'What if it were,' at last said my husband impatiently; 'what would you do?' 'I should try to speak to her,' I replied. He remained silent for a moment, and then he said: 'We had better go out when the curtain falls again and ask the door-keeper something about her.'

"Well, this was no sooner said than done. We hastened as fast as possible to the stage door, where in a frightfully dirty little den, we saw an old woman who was drinking brandy with two or three *figurantes*. This woman looked at us with utter contempt, tossed her nose in the air, and haughtily asked, 'What do you want here?' My husband politely explained that he wished to know if Mademoiselle Flora Misri's real name was not Adèle Cochard, but the old woman rudely replied, 'How do I know? I should have work and no mistake, if I undertook to find out the real names of all these ladies!' whereupon she laughed at us scornfully, and the girls who were with her did the same. 'In that case,' said I, 'will you kindly tell us how we can get at Mademoiselle Misri?' However, she laughed even more than before, and asked where on earth we came from to imagine we could walk into a theatre like we might walk into a mill. Still, finally she condescended to say that we might wait outside until Mademoiselle Flora went away, or else we might write her a line which might be sent to her at once.

"My husband decided on the latter course, whereupon the *concierge* gave him a pencil, with which he wrote a note to the Water-Nymph, telling her that if she were really Adèle Cochard, and would have the kindness to look up at the amphitheatre she would there see her sister Julie. We then went back to our seats, Laurent being in a great state of indignation against the *concierge*, though I did not think much about her. The Water-Nymph soon appeared, and I felt certain that her first look was for us. I was not mistaken, for our eyes met and she wafted me a kiss. I was greatly agitated. To think of meeting in this fashion after four years' separation. I wondered how I should be able to speak to my sister, when, during the next *entr'acte*, a female attendant appeared and asked my husband if he were Laurent Cornevin. My husband said yes, and the woman thereupon gave him a letter. My husband wished to hand her a gratuity, but she went off saying, 'No, I am already paid.' I was quite touched at this attention on my sister's part. Laurent opened the letter, in which Adèle said she was dying to see us, but could not possibly come to us that evening. However, as the next day was Sunday, she wished us to come with the children to breakfast with her at eleven o'clock in the Rue de Douai.

"Laurent did not say much, but he rose the next morning as gay as a lark, and said he was going to have his beard trimmed in honour of the Water-Nymph. It was striking eleven when we reached the Rue de Douai with our three children. My sister resided on the second floor of a handsome new house. A woman with a familiar, saucy smile, opened the door, and received us as if we had been expected. She showed us into a room which struck me as the height of luxury, though Laurent did not think so. He had served in very great families, and he whispered that all that glittered was not gold, and that what he saw was not worth much. A moment later in sailed my sister in a superb dressing-gown, trimmed with lace. She was delighted to see us, and embraced us cordially. She was astonished at seeing my children. 'You have three already,' she exclaimed. 'Just think of it! and I never knew it!' However, I had not been with my sister for five minutes when I began to regret our meeting. She had only retained the bitterest memories of our youth. She complained, with extraordinary violence, of all our family, of our brothers and sisters in turn; of our father—whom she called 'the old drunkard'—and of our mother, whom she seemed to hate. My husband was as much displeased as I was at the tone she adopted, and I was beginning to feel very uncomfortable, when, suddenly, the servant came to say that breakfast was on the table.

"The dining-room seemed to me even more imposing than the drawing-room, for the furniture was in carved oak, and the sideboard was full of glass and china. Adèle, or Flora rather, had spared no expense, and either from a desire to dazzle us or from an honest wish to please, she had ordered a princely repast. The table groaned under the weight of good things, and beside each plate there were four or five glasses with a quantity of other things which I did not even know the use of. All this display troubled me. Besides, I saw my husband's face grow dark. My sister insisted on his drinking her wine, and, unfortunately, he obeyed her too well, for his eyes grew very bright and his cheeks very pale. 'Take care,' I said, in a low tone, but he paid no attention to my remonstrances, but went on drinking just the same.

"We had been at table for more than two hours when a new dish of meat was brought in under a silver cover. 'What, some more!' cried my husband; and then, examining my sister, he said: 'You must have a large for-

tune to spend money in this way.' 'Yes, I have money!' she answered, carelessly. 'You are well paid, then, at your theatre?' said he. She stared at him, and then laughed. 'I am paid just twenty francs a month, and I furnish my own costume.'

"An angry gesture came from my husband, and I really thought he was going to kick the table over. He looked at me and then at my sister. 'Mademoiselle Flora, you are a very shrewd woman,' he said. I tried to make my sister hold her tongue, but my words and signs were all in vain. 'I have been lucky, I admit,' she said, 'but I wasn't so at first. I had a notion when I ran away from home that larks would fall from the sky already roasted into my mouth. Fine larks they were! The man I followed was a perfect fiend, and we had not been together a fortnight before he beat me. Ah, if girls only knew! But I was stupid in those days, and the fellow frightened me out of my senses. When he had spent all the money he had at the wine shops he bade me get some more—the how was none of his business he said, with a sneer—if not he would beat me. You may say I could have left him. Very true; but where was I to go? I should, no doubt, be in his clutches to this day if he had not quarrelled with a man and drawn a knife, whereupon the police nabbed him. Fortunately the theatre wanted some pretty girls just at that time. I applied and was received, and since then I have nothing to complain of.' I quailed under the look which my husband here riveted on me. Had it been my life, his wife's that was being recorded, he could not have been more exasperated. 'As to my being shrewd,' continued Flora, who saw nothing whatever, 'I'm hardly that, for I may know how to get money, but I don't know how to keep it. If I were firmer I might have made some good investments; but I am too good-natured by far, and the result is that I am robbed and imposed upon.'

"She went on in this way with increasing bitterness, when suddenly the door opened, and a tall, thin man came in. His moustaches were well waxed, his hat was a little over one ear, and he had a cigar in his mouth. He did not say good morning, nor utter a civil word to any one, but he just looked at my sister, and then angrily exclaimed: 'What! not yet dressed! What on earth have you been doing all the morning?'—'You can see for yourself, Victor; I have been breakfasting with my relatives.' Never shall I forget the look with which he surveyed us. 'That may be all very nice,' said he, 'but, all the same, you ought to have been dressed. The carriage is waiting'—'Is it?' said my sister. 'Well, then, send it away. You bore me to death, Victor, with your tyranny!' But he interrupted her. 'What on earth do you mean?' he cried; and, raising her from her chair, despite her resistance and cries, he pushed her into the next room."

Madame Delorge and the two gentlemen were listening with that silent disgust with which one hears a record of disgraceful conduct. However, Madame Cornevin had only paused to draw a long breath, and she then proceeded speaking more rapidly than before: "I was horrified and ashamed, but before I could decide what to do or say, my youngest child woke up and began to cry. Laurent was as white as a sheet, and I really thought he would fly at this man's throat. My husband's strength was so prodigious that I dared not think what might happen if his rage got beyond his control. We could hear my sister's voice and her companion's in the next room, and we could even distinguish the insulting epithets they exchanged. Then came a crash of glass, a scuffle, and a shriek. 'Help! help!' cried my sister. 'This is too much!' said my husband, and he was about to rush into the next room, when I fell on my knees before him and implored him

to be quiet. 'You are right,' said Laurent; 'I won't interfere; the scene is too disgraceful. But come away—come instantly, and bring the children.' I obeyed without the least argument. Never had I heard my husband speak in such a voice before. When we got outside he pulled my arm through his and almost dragged me along. At last, when we reached a quiet place, he stopped, folded his arms, and looked at me. 'Well!' he said. I burst into tears. He shook his head sadly, and in a gentle voice exclaimed: 'I thank God every day that you are my wife. I love you and respect you—but from this day forth you must never set your foot in your sister's house. Do you hear?' I heard him, and promised to obey—while he, seeing how sorely I was hurt, said kindly: 'And now, what shall we do? It seems to me we had better finish the day in the country.'

Here Madame Cornevin's voice broke as if with emotion, but she was determined to finish her narrative, and in a moment she had resumed as follows:—"I fully intended to keep my promise to my husband; but of course I could not foresee that my sister would come to me. However, she did come on the very next day, quite gay and smiling, arrayed in a gorgeous toilette, and with her pockets full of sweetmeats. As soon as she was seated she began to explain the scene of the day before. She averred that all lovers had similar freaks; that anger made men say a host of things which they were heartily ashamed of an hour later—things, too, which were not true. But she saw that I was not convinced by her arguments, and then she began to cry, and declared she was the most miserable of women. 'Why don't you leave him?' I exclaimed, indignantly. What was my surprise to hear her say that she did not dare to do so. She hated him, she despised him, and yet she clung to him. He seemed to have bewitched her. She unfolded all the terrible details of her existence, which was apparently so brilliant—and said more than once; 'With all your hard work and your poverty, your life is far happier than mine.' I was, of course, obliged to tell her that my husband had forbidden me to see her, and I supposed she would be very angry on hearing this; but no, she simply bowed her head, and said, sadly, 'He is right! I should do the same if I were in his place!'

"She came again and again, and when I told Laurent of it, he replied: 'I can't bid you put your sister out of doors, but ask her if she won't come in a less conspicuous dress.' She did this, and continued to call and see me whenever she had any special trouble, at times helping me with my work and talking with considerable frankness. She declared, too, that she respected my husband all the more for refusing to see her. Adèle—or Flora, rather—was not a bad girl then—nor is she bad now. She has a good heart, and she is tender and generous. Her first impulses are always good ones. But she is weak and fickle, and from one hour to another she will change all her ideas, projects, and wishes. The last person who speaks is always right with her.

"I was, therefore, not in the least astonished to see her change entirely in about a year's time. She adopted a most mysterious air, and spoke of grave events which were near at hand: 'I have become a very serious personage,' she said. 'I am interested in politics. She now never complained of this Victor, whom we had seen with her, but, on the contrary, she audibly blessed her stars that she had met him; 'For I shall insist' she added, 'on his getting your husband a lucrative position. Only yesterday I obtained through his influence a little tobacco shop for an old crone I knew. Of course I could do far more than that for my sister.' I was naturally quite dazzled and I told my husband what she said. He flew into a passion at the first

word, swearing that I bid fair to become as bad as my sister, whose boastings were all lies, and even if they were not, he was too proud to accept such patronage. I was unwise enough to repeat this to Flora, who was naturally much exasperated. 'I know many a man,' she said, 'who would be only too glad to accept Victor's protection, and lick his boots besides.' After this we grew cooler towards each other, my sister and I, and her visits became less frequent. I had not seen her for three months, when our misfortunes came—General Delorge was killed and my husband disappeared. I should never have dreamed, however, of applying to my sister but for the advice given me by Madame Delorge, for how could I have supposed that Victor and De Combelaïne were one and the same person? I discovered this, however, for while watching for M. de Combelaïne I saw this Victor, and recognised him."

"Madame Delorge thought this a very important circumstance; and according to her advice I went on Saturday evening to call on my sister. She does not now reside in the Rue de Douai, in the apartment which formerly struck me as so magnificent. She now has a much finer one on the Boulevard des Capucines. On entering the house I was instructed to go up the servants' stairs, and when I told a footman in livery that I wished to see Madame Flora Misri, he laughed in my face and said: 'Impossible! We have ten persons dining with us.' I insisted, but the man lost patience, and I believe he was about to push me out of the apartment when my sister crossed the passage. As soon as she saw me, she uttered a little shriek of surprise, and without noticing the servant's astonished look, she said: 'What has happened, dear?' I told her as briefly as possible of my great loss, but I took care to make no allusion to General Delorge. 'It's horrible,' she cried—'horrible! What will you do without your husband, with your five children to provide for? No, no,' she added, hastily, 'I won't bear this—my people shan't be meddled with. Wait a moment, I'll soon be back.' So saying, she disappeared. I heard a door open and shut, and then came a noise of voices in earnest discussion. Presently Flora came back to me with a beaming face. 'Keep up your courage,' she said; 'Victor will attend to that matter, and at another time prevent Laurent from meddling with what doesn't concern him! Come and see me to-morrow!'"

My heart leaped with joy, and it was with the greatest impatience that I waited for the next day, which, alas! had a bitter disappointment in store for me. When I went to see my sister I found her out of temper and embarrassed. 'My poor Julie,' she said, as I kissed her, 'I deceived you last night; not wilfully, but because I was deceived myself. No one knows what has become of your husband. The police have done their best to find some trace of him, but all to no avail.' She handed me some money as she spoke, but I rejected it with scorn, for it seemed to me as if it were the price of my husband's liberty or blood. And then I went away, feeling certain that I had nothing to hope for from my sister—but comforted all the same by a voice which seemed to tell me that my husband was not dead, and that I should yet see him again."

XV.

MADAME CORNEVIN had hardly finished her narrative when Madame Delorge looked at her two friends in turn, and asked: "What do you think of this?"

"I think," said the lawyer, "that Flora and De Combelaïne were taken by surprise when Madame Cornevin first called on them. The next day, however, they had discussed the situation, and hence their final reply, from which I infer that Cornevin is not only alive but that they know where he is——"

"Precisely!" interrupted Madame Delorge.

"If he is living, he will be our witness," resumed the lawyer.

"And I'll find him!" exclaimed Ducoudray, starting to his feet. "It will be a new trade to me—that of a spy and detective—but I'm not ashamed of it. It is always honourable to serve a just cause, especially when success awaits one as surely as it does in this instance."

Madame Delorge thanked her friend, but her eyes were still fixed on M. Roberjot. "What shall we do?" she asked. The lawyer shook his head. "Wait—wait, that is all. Wait and hope."

Madame Delorge had foreseen this reply. "Well, I will wait" she answered. "My son and Léon have been talking to you, I believe. You have heard of their projects, and I will arm myself with patience."

When M. Roberjot withdrew, he was greatly disturbed in mind. "How on earth am I to make her love me!" he murmured. How? Only by avenging her husband. This conviction recalled him to a sense of his political duties, and also reminded him of his friend Verdale, whom he had not seen since the evening when he entrusted him with his title-deed. However, he was not astonished at the delay which had occurred, for it might have been caused by the desire to secure a more favourable moment for the sale. Still he was none the less pleased when on returning home he found a letter awaiting him, addressed in the handwriting of the unappreciated architect. But, to his consternation, the missive ran as follows:—

"Friend Roberjot—If, on receipt of this note, you see fit to have me arrested you can do, so I shall be condemned to five years imprisonment, or more. I have sold your estate, and I have appropriated its full value—not the sum you agreed to let me have, but the entire amount—one hundred and eighteen thousand nine hundred and thirty-one francs! I know what you will say—that it is a most scandalous abuse of confidence—but I could not help it. The most extraordinary opportunity presented itself of making from three to five hundred thousand francs within a fortnight, and I could not resist the temptation. And if you are good enough to keep quiet, I will bring you half the profits in fifteen days from now.

"VERDALE."

M. Roberjot sank on to a chair. "Ah! the wretch," he cried; "I'm ruined!"

However philosophical a man may be, or superior to sublunary concerns, he rarely accepts such a loss as this with perfect equanimity; and in this especial case circumstances made the misfortune particularly bitter. "He shall not escape me like this," muttered the lawyer; "he shall repent of his villany between four walls!" He rushed down the stairs as he spoke—nearly overturning his faithful servant, who had only just time to step aside as he asked with considerable timidity: "Will you be back to dinner, sir?"

As if that were a time to think of dinner—when he was hurrying to

make his complaint against this traitor in due form! Fortunately, or unfortunately, as will be shown later on, it was growing dark, and Roberjot was compelled to postpone his intentions by remembering that at this time of day he would find no one at the Palace of Justice.

After a moment's reflection he hailed a passing cab, jumped inside, and once seated, he began to read the letter again. He plainly detected between the lines the threat that if he made a row he might say good-bye to his money for good, while if he submitted there was at least the bare possibility that he might at some time or other see it again. In that case what should he do? Still in a woful state of indecision he drove to the office of his notary, who received him with a significant exclamation, "Well, how are you, you extravagant fellow!" he cried. "What do you intend to do with all the money you have turned your acres into?"

"Then my determination surprised you?"

"Of course it did—for I consider this a very bad time to sell. But your letter was so urgent——"

"Urgent?" repeated the lawyer, in bewilderment.

"Yes; and its urgent language, coupled with your friend's explanations, convinced me of the uselessness of any remonstrances. But it seems to me that you don't look over-pleased yourself. Are you sorry?"

"No, not at all—of course not;—but did you keep my letter? Please show it to me."

The notary looked somewhat surprised. "What do you want it for?" he asked.

That was precisely what Roberjot did not care to say. He knew that a full explanation at the present moment would commit him irretrievably, and so, in a careless tone, he answered: "Oh! never mind."

This was hardly satisfactory, but nevertheless the notary opened a drawer and took out a letter which he handed to his friend. The architect had certainly made a bold stroke, for he had altogether suppressed the original letter with which M. Roberjot had intrusted him and forged another in which he, Roberjot, gave his notary orders to immediately sell his property at any sacrifice, and hand the proceeds to M. Verdale. The reasons given by the architect to justify this precipitation were very plausible, and showed a thorough acquaintance with Roberjot's affairs.

"What has gone wrong, my boy?" said the notary. "You are as white as a sheet."

"It's nothing," said the advocate, with an effort, "only you must do me a favor. You must keep this letter as if it were a most precious jewel, for it is literally priceless to me!"

"Sleep in peace, my dear fellow; I will put it in my safe if you like!"

Enlightened as to Verdale's manner of operating, Roberjot had nothing more to do at his notary's, so he took his leave, and twenty minutes later he reached the lodging-house where the architect had resided for several years. The landlord, a stout, red-faced man, with a bald head, appeared in person to answer M. Roberjot's inquiries, to which he simply said, "M. Verdale is away on a journey."

The advocate was fully prepared for an answer of this kind. "When did he go?" he asked.

"He left at two o'clock."

"Will he be long away?"

The landlord looked at Roberjot earnestly. "Are you M. Verdale's friend?" he asked.

"Most certainly," replied the lawyer, in a tone of concentrated bitterness, "and a very dear and tried one."

"Then," said the landlord, "you are the very one whom M. Verdale mentioned, just as he was getting into the cab to drive to the station. He said you would come this very evening in a great rage to ask for him."

Although Roberjot was in no laughing mood, he could not refrain from smiling at this singular forecast on the architect's part. "Yes, I'm that friend," he said, "and I can assure you that I am in quite as much of a rage as he desired."

The landlord bowed profoundly. "Yes, he must have meant you, that's clear," he rejoined. "And, he said, 'Father Bonnet, tell this friend of mine not to be in a hurry, but to wait and see, and, above all, not to be anxious. Whatever happens, this day two weeks hence, I shall be at home again.'"

The landlord paused abruptly, being disconcerted by the advocate's eyes, which were obstinately riveted on him. "Why do you look at me in that way?" he asked.

"Simply because you are deceiving me."

"Oh! sir."

"I feel quite sure of what I say," continued the lawyer. "M. Verdale is not absent. M. Verdale is in this house."

The man lifted his hand as if to call Heaven to witness that he spoke the truth, and then, in a solemn tone, he replied: "M. Verdale left this afternoon—and I hope all my tenants will move away if I'm lying now. If you don't believe me, sir, I will take you to your friend's room—it is empty, and my wife has taken away the sheets."

This last detail went too far—when a man proves too much he proves nothing. This was evidently M. Roberjot's opinion, for he drew out his pocket-book. "Be kind enough, sir," he quietly said, "not to think me more of a simpleton than you are yourself. M. Verdale has changed his room—that is all. Show me where he is and this thousand-franc note shall be yours."

The man's eyes glittered with cupidity, and he stretched out his hand towards the money, but it was not yielded to his grasp. "I have told the truth," he said, sadly. "M. Verdale is away, but he will return in two weeks from to-day."

It was useless to argue further, but M. Roberjot went away thoroughly convinced that the architect was concealed somewhere within the four walls of that dingy hotel. He could easily satisfy himself on the point by filing his complaint and asking for a search warrant—but would that be prudent or wise? "I must be particularly cautious," he said, "with such a cunning fellow as that knave. The least false step will carry off the very small chance I now possess of getting a franc of my money back again." And as the clock struck nine just then he remembered that he was hungry, and regardless of the servant who was waiting for him, he went into the Restaurant Magny and ordered dinner.

The more he thought over the affair the more certain he became that M. Verdale was still in Paris—and consequently the more hopeful he felt. "If he stays here," he said to himself, "it is because he has told me the truth and has embarked in some great speculation, the result of which is still uncertain. I hope to Heaven he will succeed, for in that case he will bring my money back." All things considered, he decided that it was best to wait until the time fixed by the architect had expired. His complaint would be

equally forcible a fortnight later, and in the mean time he would not lose his only chance. "But if in two weeks from to-day, at high noon, there are no tidings of this noble friend, Verdale," he muttered, "at one o'clock precisely the police will be on his heels."

XVI.

WHILST M. Roberjot was thus cogitating anent his imperiled fortune, Madame Delorge, with the assistance of M. Ducoudray's experience, was occupied in attending to hers. At the moment of the first shock she had calmed herself with the hope of immediate vengeance, but she now realized her mistake.

She no longer believed, as the folks round about her said, and as it was the fashion to say, that the year would not elapse without another revolution which should sweep the president and his partisans from their position. But she was firmly persuaded that a government founded on such a crime as that of the 2nd of December must end disastrously, and that a day would come when its foundations undermined by the innocent blood shed on the Boulevard Montmartre, would give way entirely. The stronger her faith in the future, the more firmly did Madame Delorge feel the necessity of waiting—and thus she summoned strength to attend to those maternal duties, neglect of which often upsets the finest projects. By her husband's death she of course, no longer received his pay of ten thousand francs a year, and yet her expenses were increased. First, she had agreed to allow Madame Cornevin a pension of twelve hundred francs and she had promised to defray the expenses of the education of Cornevin's son, and intended to make this education as complete as possible. The charges in this respect, would of course, increase each year. In three years, moreover, masters would be required for her own daughter Pauline. She, not unnaturally decided to retain Krauss, who on his side had told her, in so many words, that he would never leave her, nor accept any wages from her, but would rather go in search of work to increase his mistress's income.

On the other hand what had Madame Delorge to depend upon. Eleven thousand francs per annum she supposed ; but she was mistaken. Her friend, M. Ducoudray, true to his instincts and habits as a business man, took great pains to undeceive her, but eventually showed her clearly that her income could not be estimated at more than nine thousand francs ; if it might occasionally turn out better, well and good ; but she must not rely upon it.

It was in the general's study that the widow and her friend discussed these important questions, and it struck the worthy Ducoudray that he should never have a better opportunity for inserting a wedge in regard to his matrimonial hopes, which he had by no means abandoned. Accordingly in a somewhat trembling voice, for his heart beat as it did when he made his declaration to the first Madame Ducoudray—he began a long and somewhat complicated speech, which was designed to enlighten his dear friend's widow. "If she were quite right," said he, "in taking all needful measures for the future, she was equally wrong in making them binding and irrevocable. Human nature is changeable. Was she sure, could she *be* sure, that before eighteen months or a few years had elapsed, some event might not take place which would disturb all her calculations ? Was she not still young ? Solitude would not, perhaps, always prove as tempting as now. Her children would

grow up—three children—since Léon Cornevin might now be regarded as one of them—and she would need a man's hand to guide them."

Here the worthy old fellow's voice died away, for Madame Delorge was looking at him with so strange an expression that he felt frightened. "Are you speaking to me of the possibility of a second marriage?" she coldly asked.

He bowed, but dared not speak.

"If such an idea should ever enter my head," continued the widow, "I should repel it as if it were a crime."

Ducoudray turned a bright scarlet. "I hope to Heaven," he said, to himself, "that she had no notion I was thinking of myself!" For he had lived three months in such intimate companionship with Madame Delorge, who was superior to any woman he had previously met; he had grown accustomed to thinking of her, to acting for her, and obeying all her inspirations; and he shivered at the prospect of returning to his former lonely life in which his only amusement had been the chatter of his housekeeper.

However, Madame Delorge had no idea of the castles in the air which her old neighbour had built up, and attaching small importance to his words, she abruptly resumed, to his great delight, the discussion of her plans for the future. In the first place, ought she to remain where she was? Ought not this villa to be given up, dear as it was to her, and filled, with a thousand recollections of her husband? The rent was too heavy, and it required the care of too many servants. "I have given notice," she murmured, "because I knew I ought to do so. But where shall we go?"

The Château de Glorierès offered many advantages. There she could reside in comfort, reaping the many advantages of a land owner living on his estate. She could place Raymond and Léon at the Collège de Vendôme, which has a certain reputation, with the advantage of moderate charges. But this was one side of the question. To bury herself in the country would, in Madame Delorge's opinion, be to desert the field of warfare, and relinquish all hope of profiting by events. And so she said to herself, "I shall remain at Paris, cost what it will." And worthy Ducoudray was commissioned to find an apartment suited to her means, somewhere in the centre of Paris. A young servant girl of fifteen or sixteen, with old Krauss, would, she thought, be all she needed. Krauss she knew to be a good cook or a good nurse, in whatever capacity she might require him. It was with difficulty that M. Ducoudray refrained from offering to place every sou he had in the world at his friend's disposal. His heart was very soft and he grieved to see this woman whom he so adored crushed by such sordid cares! Still he dared not speak the word. The next day he started in search of an apartment, and after climbing hundreds of staircases, and facing as many janitors, he at last discovered, in the Rue Blanche, a suite of rooms which seemed to fulfil all one could reasonably expect for nine hundred francs per annum. It consisted of five apartments with a kitchen and a cellar, with a servant's room in the attic.

Madame Delorge went to see it, found it to her taste, and as it was vacant, agreed to take possession immediately. She at once began her preparations for moving, and, one afternoon, while she was in her *salon* packing some ornaments, Krauss entered, looking so pale and so frightened that she thought him the herald of some evil news. "What is it?" she cried.

The faithful servant could hardly speak. "One of the murderers of my dear general is in the hall," he gasped. "He wishes to see you, madame, and has sent in this card."

Madame Delorge looked at the card and saw that it bore the name of the Viscount de Maumussy. She turned very pale, as if she were about to faint. What could this man want? Still struggling for composure, she replied, "Show him in."

The old soldier went to obey her orders, while she darted to a door and called the two boys. They hastened to her, and she bade them enter the drawing-room and not lose one word of what would be said. They had no time to ask a question, for an instant later M. de Maumussy entered the *salon*, announced by Krauss. He was, as usual, carefully dressed in the latest style, gloved with a delicate shade of gray, with an eyeglass dangling across his coat, and holding in his right hand a slender cane—his air and manner offering a fashionable combination of English stiffness and French levity. He was as he had been for years; his beard admirably trimmed, his curly hair combed over his high wide forehead, his expression at once insolently benevolent, and patronizing, his eyes quick, and vivacious, and his lips curved into a mocking smile.

The spectral attitude of Madame Delorge, who stood pale and shadowy in her heavy mourning, with the two boys at her side, would have disconcerted any other man than M. de Maumussy. But he had not been named the "imperturbable" for nothing. As he crossed the threshold he bowed profoundly with that air of courtesy which was, his admirers said, "one of his greatest charms." "My visit," he began, "seems to astonish you somewhat, madame."

"Very much, sir," answered Madame Delorge, haughtily.

He bowed more profoundly than before, and advanced to the centre of the drawing-room. "You will excuse it, I trust," he continued, "when I have had the honour of explaining its motive."

"Speak, sir."

The viscount's eyes wandered from chair to chair with a look that clearly said: "Don't you intend to ask me to sit down?" And as Madame Delorge did not seem to understand these glances, he exclaimed: "My explanations will be a trifle long, madame."

"Ah! you will have the kindness to abridge them as much as possible, sir."

His first impulse, it was evident, was to take the chair which was not offered him, but he did not dare do so. Standing, therefore, and in an impassive voice, he continued: "You treat me as an enemy, and, although I am grieved, I am not surprised by it. I know the weight of the blow that has fallen upon you, for I well realised the value of Delorge, his intelligence and goodness of heart."

"And was that the reason you wished him murdered?"

The viscount did not wince. "You are mistaken, madame," he said; "the general fell in a duel, after an honest fight!"

"No one, sir, has a stronger interest than yourself in thus stating the case."

M. de Maumussy shook his head. "I am willing to admit to you, madame, that the explanations which have been furnished to you were false. There were reasons of State that necessitated them. Delorge was, in reality, the victim of a mistake. Had I controlled events, not a hair of his head would have been touched. But fate ordained otherwise. All that I was allowed to do I did. He was warned, and he had only to look out for himself. Had he pleased to be on the winning side, he could have done so."

"My husband was an honest man, sir."

"I know it, madame; and that is why I should be so glad to-day, were he living, to see him working with us, for I am certain he would be. He

was too intelligent not to recognise that the government which satisfied the greater number of interests would necessarily be the lawful one. But I am going too far; the disaster which occurred, resulted from an indiscretion of M. de Combelaïne——”

At this point M. de Maumussy hesitated; however, if he hoped for a word of encouragement he did not get it, for the widow and the two boys remained perfectly silent. At last he continued: “M. de Combelaïne, in spite of what I had said, fancied that General Delorge was with the *coup d'état*, and for this reason wrote to him, and made an appointment at the Elysée Palace. The general was punctual, and Combelaïne at once took him into a small drawing-room, where, without the least preamble, he foolishly proceeded to explain the plan of the movement which had been organized to save France. Delorge listened in silence, but when Combelaïne had finished, he exclaimed: ‘You are a villain, and I shall denounce you!’ As you may imagine, this proved a terrible blow for the count. He saw himself dishonoured, lost; he had also irretrievably compromised the success of the organization, and endangered not merely himself but also the prince president. Almost any man would have lost his head under similar circumstances. So he started forward and exclaimed: ‘No, you will not denounce me, for you shall not leave this place alive.’”

Madame Delorge gave vent to a stifled sob. “And he did not!” she sighed.

“No, he did not; but not by reason of any crime,” rejoined De Maumussy, eagerly. “Listen to me. It was at that very moment that I entered the little drawing-room. I grasped the situation at a glance, and I was appalled. I darted between the two adversaries, and I insisted on your husband listening to reason. I entreated him not to take advantage of the confidence that had so imprudently been placed in him. I told him if he would give us his word of honour to remain silent for forty-eight hours, we would ask no more. But he positively refused to do this. He had taken Combelaïne by the arm and shook him violently, declaring that, if he did not follow him to the garden at once, he would drag him there, after slapping his face in presence of all the people assembled in the reception rooms. De Combelaïne then did precisely what every man in the world would have done—he followed the general to the garden, and if the chances of the duel were in his favour, he is to be pitied, or cursed, if you will, but not accused of being a murderer.”

“Have you finished, sir?” asked Madame Delorge, coldly, as M. de Maumussy paused to draw breath.

“I have told you the exact truth, madame,”

“Then, sir, allow me to leave you. Come, my children.” She did not ring to have him shown out by a servant. She did worse—she retired herself so as to oblige him to withdraw.

However, just as she reached the door he exclaimed: “One word more, madame.”

She paused for a moment, showing perfectly well by her air and manner, that she would accept no explanations and listen to no arguments. “I am in a hurry,” she said.

The utter contempt of her tone would have wounded any man in the least degree sensitive; but the viscount was one of those persons who sacrifice themselves to the success of the enterprise they have on hand, declaring that a man is avenged by his success. So he restrained himself, and in a most friendly tone retorted: “General Delorge, madame, was a brave soldier, and has left many friends——”

The widow started.

"And these friends," resumed M. de Maumussy, "remembered him, that is to say, they remembered those who were dearest to him. The general was of poor parentage, and his generosity was proverbial in the army. He has left no fortune——"

"He has left an honoured name, sir, and a spotless sword."

A faint colour rose to De Maumussy's cheeks. He was growing impatient. "This woman is stupid with her Roman airs!" he thought to himself, and then he said aloud: "You are right, madame, but unfortunately in this corrupt nineteenth century, a heritage like that, no matter how glorious and enviable it may be, it is not quite enough. You are about to find yourself face to face with the trials of straightened circumstances."

"May I ask sir, what——"

"Excuse me, madame, it matters much to me, and I am anxious, not to repair, for that is impossible, but to soften as much as possible the grievous misfortune which it was not in my power to avert. I ventured to come here to-day so as to have, personally, the pleasure of telling you that your name is set down for a pension of six thousand francs——"

"I refuse it, sir," rejoined Madame Delorge.

"Permit me——"

"I refuse it absolutely."

Any other person than De Maumussy would have felt himself beaten and incapable of replying. Not he, however. "Have you the right to do so, madame?" he asked; "you are not alone—you have children—these two boys whom I see at your side. For them, if not for yourself, are you not very-hasty in taking a decision which you will repent of, perhaps, when it is too late?"

This was too much for Madame Delorge. "Enough, sir," she cried, in a trembling voice, "Enough! Do you imagine that I am so blind that I do not fully understand the shameful reasons for this last insult—the insult of your presence under my roof? Weak as I am, helpless as I seem, you are troubled by me—a shadow terrifies an assassin! In your eyes I am more than a remorse, I am a threat! This is why you were told, 'Offer her money—she will accept it, and hold her tongue; we shall then no longer be uneasy. If she should ever venture to open her lips we shall be able to reply, Why do you talk of your husband—haven't we paid you for him?'"

Positively there was more moderation than anger in the look which De Maumussy now gave Madame Delorge. He flattered himself on being somewhat of an artist, and never had he seen contempt and anger so magnificently expressed. "She is superb!" he thought.

Meanwhile, she proceeded in breathless haste: "We do not choose to be paid, sir. We don't choose to barter the chances which the future may have in store for us. We—my children and myself—intend to cherish our hatred and nurse our vengeance!"

An enigmatical smile flitted over De Maumussy's lips. Was it not natural that he should hold this poor widow's threats in derision.

"Yes, and we shall have our turn yet!" cried Léon Cornevin; "and later on, when I'm a man, and stand face to face with you, you will have cause to remember what I now say."

"I hope, Monsieur Delorge——" began the viscount.

"I am not the son of General Delorge," replied the boy with an angry gesture; "I am the son of Cornevin, the groom."

"And I, sir, am Raymond Delorge," said the other boy; "and I swear

to you that I intend to be a man before my time, so that I may the earlier avenge my father."

Was De Maumussy stirred by this hatred, and had he a presentiment of the future? Or did he think the threats and vehemence of these two children utterly unworthy of notice? No one could have told from the quiet tone in which he replied: "Thanks for your lesson, madame, it is a fortunate thing for me that there is no man here who shares your sentiments."

"You are mistaken, villain! for here is one!" cried a hoarse voice.

The vicomte hastily turned. On the threshold of the room stood Krauss, who was as pale as death, with a pistol in each hand. De Maumussy threw himself on one side with an exclamation. But Madame Delorge darted towards Krauss and caught him by the arm. "What are you going to do?" she exclaimed.

"Let me be, madame," he answered, with a threatening laugh; "it will be soon over. Ah! villain—after murdering my general, you come here to insult his wife!"

It was only with great difficulty that Madame Delorge succeeded in restraining the old trooper. "Go, sir," she cried to the viscount. "For Heaven's sake, go!"

He hesitated. Perhaps he feared that they might think him a coward, and he was brave—this quality must be granted to him—so brave indeed that his colour had not changed, although his life depended on an imperceptible movement of Krauss's finger. At last, however, he went slowly towards the door. "Adieu, madame," he said, as he crossed the threshold. "Now, whether you desire it or not, the amount of your pension will be paid to you!"

XVII.

MADAME DELORGE hardly heard this last sarcasm, which was the key-note to De Maumussy's character. She needed all her presence of mind to hold Krauss and prevent him from following the viscount. It was only with the greatest difficulty that she recalled him to reason. She finally sent for Ducoudray, and his solicitations had to be added to her solemn entreaties, and Raymond's remonstrances before the obstinate old trooper would give the solemn oath she asked—and swear to renounce his plans of too summary a justice.

"This has really been a terrible scene," said Ducoudray, as he drew the charges of both pistols, "and the consequences of it are something appalling."

On this score, however, Madame Delorge was by no means dismayed. The only thing which disturbed her was the pension threatened by De Maumussy. Was she to be exposed to the frightful humiliation of reading some morning in the *Moniteur*: "The Prince President, whose solicitude for the army is well known, has decided that a life pension of six thousand francs shall be paid from his private purse to the widow of General Pierre Delorge."

In that case what should she do? The matter so tormented her that she could not close her eyes all night—and the next day at nine o'clock she went to ask for M. Roberjot's advice. It was a Thursday, the very day, as it happened, when the term fixed by M. Verdale as the limit of his old friend's patience, was to expire. When the anxious woman arrived at the lawyer's residence, the servant said that his master had just gone out, but would return in a few minutes. Knowing the rooms, Madame Delorge was about to enter M. Roberjot's office, when the valet stopped her, saying: "Not there, madame,

not there—some one is already waiting for my master in there,” and thereupon he showed her into a small parlour—the one in which she had been received on the occasion of her first visit, and where she had heard the lawyer enunciate his political opinions.

But this time the door was open, and from the chair she took she could partially view the interior of M. Roberjot's office. The man who was waiting there did not seem to notice her entrance into the parlour. He was walking up and down in evident agitation, and from time to time giving utterance to such exclamations as these: “Where on earth can he have gone? He must have expected me.”

Suddenly, however, he stopped, for a door on the other side of the office had opened, and a moment later Madame Delorge saw this strange visitor dart to that part of the room which was beyond her range of vision. “Well! What did I say?” he exclaimed, “am I not a man of my word?”

Madame Delorge recognised her lawyer's voice as he replied: “It is as well that you kept it, for on the stroke of twelve I should have filed my complaint.”

He walked forward as he spoke to the centre of the room, where Madame Delorge could see him being followed by his visitor, whose attitude was very humble. With a vague presentiment that some grave explanation was impending, Madame Delorge tried to make her presence known by coughing and moving her chair. But they did not seem to hear her. The lawyer had taken a seat at his desk, while the other, who continued standing, earnestly exclaimed: “Do you know that you receive me like a dog who interferes in a game of ten-pins? You are not courteous. Haven't I kept my word? Suppose I hadn't come?”

“You would have been just what you are now—a dishonest man, Monsieur Verdale.”

The architect—for he it was—lightly shrugged his shoulders. “Come, now,” he replied, “can't you make up your mind to forgive me for the fright I have occasioned you?”

The lawyer's clenched hand came down with a furious bang on his desk. “Enough of these impudent jokes,” he said. “Let us have facts, not phrases.”

The architect's previous embarrassment and humility must have been feigned, for they in no way corresponded with the gay volubility of the words which now poured from his lips. “Listen to my confession,” he said. “I admit that my proceedings were—well, a little hasty. But I really had no choice—any one would have done as I did. Look at it yourself. On the very morrow of the day when you intrusted your papers to me, I was crossing the Place de la Bourse to go to your agent's, when I met Coutanceau. I stopped him, and said just as I always say to him: ‘Ah! Master Strongbox, when do you intend to make my fortune?’ I took it for granted that he would reply as he always did: ‘To-morrow, at half-past nine.’ But not at all; he looked at me and curtly replied, ‘Can you keep a secret?’ Considerably surprised, I answered, ‘Of course I can, if my fortune depends on my doing so.’ Whereupon he grasped me by a button and whispered: ‘Try to obtain a hundred thousand francs within four days from now. Bring this amount to me, and I assure you that there are ninety-nine chances to one that I can make half a million for you.’ I'm no chicken, Roberjot, but I assure you when I heard this I felt faint and ill. ‘Are you in earnest?’ I asked. ‘Most certainly!’ was his reply. And shrugging his shoulders, he added: ‘I'm willing to stake every franc I own on the chances.’ On hearing

this I was literally dazzled; my head swam. Five hundred thousand francs ! What should I do ? ”

Madame Delorge heard every word of this strange confession, and considerably dismayed at being an involuntary confidante of a secret communication, she asked herself what she should do—if she had better show herself, or softly retire, telling the servant in the hall that she would return later on. However, M. Verdale proceeded : “It was then, friend Roberjot, that the thought came to me of borrowing the title deed which you had intrusted to me without asking your consent. I was horror-struck at my own audacity—I realized all I risked ; I thought of the convict’s cell to which I might be consigned, and the thought was not an agreeable one. But if the chances were in my favor, what then ? I might go to bed poor and wake up wealthy and—this was a most powerful temptation. I am no angel, and I yielded. A voice crying out to me that I should succeed inspired me with extraordinary courage. I went home and tried to imitate your writing exactly, and indeed with very little trouble I composed and wrote a letter in which you ordered your agent to sell the estate and pay the proceeds over to your good friend, Verdale. I thought the imitation perfect, but, of course, I could not tell how it would strike the agent. I was dreadfully nervous while he read it. He accepted it, however, without question, and the very next day handed me one hundred and eighty thousand beautiful francs, which I carried at once to Coutanceau.”

Madame Delorge, who had risen to depart, sank into her chair again.

“The wine was drawn, you see,” continued the architect, “and good or bad, it must be swallowed. I knew I ought to see you at once—but I asked myself how you would take it. Should I throw myself at your feet and beg your pardon ? I really thought of doing so for a moment. It would have been a stupid thing, however. I examined the situation in all its aspects, and the result of my meditations was the letter I wrote to you—a letter which was really a masterpiece—as it compelled you to silence if you wished to regain any portion of your money. I gave explicit instructions to my landlord, knowing that you could go to him for information. You were shrewd enough to grasp the truth. I was in my rooms, as you suspected, but you could not buy my landlord as you tried to do. I shut myself up for two weeks, and suffered all the tortures of a man condemned to death, but in hope of being reprieved. Look at me and see if I am not ten years older ! You, without knowing it, risked your fortune, while I, you see, risked my skin. I intended, if the speculation was a failure, to blow out my brains ! ”

He assumed a tragic air and position as he uttered these last words, vainly hoping to touch his friend’s heart. “All these explanations are utterly useless,” said M. Roberjot.

The architect folded his arms and stepped back. “Don’t you understand ? ” he asked.

“Understand what ? ”

“That my presence here announces success ! ” And then, in a tone of triumph, he continued : “For I have succeeded fully and entirely—far beyond my wildest hopes. I have made my fortune and yours. This very morning, not two hours ago, Coutanceau’s cashier paid me four hundred and eighty thousand francs. From this sum, of course, there is the amount of your involuntary loan to be deducted ; but the rest we will divide like brothers. We are rich, my boy, rich ! Will you pardon me now ? Admit my wisdom and greatness. Throw aside your solemn air and shake hands with me, old friend.”

But the lawyer did not seem disposed to do so. "You are wrong, Monsieur Verdale," he said.

The architect feared that he was not understood. "He does not believe me!" he cried. "Wait a moment, St. Thomas—wait, if you please." And making a dash at his portfolio, which he had deposited on a chair, he drew from it an enormous pile of bank-notes, and spread them out on the desk. "Feel them," he cried; "look at them, lay your hands on them! It is all ours! Victory! Long live Coutanceau!"

But the words of triumph died away on his lips when he saw the disgusted gesture with which the lawyer pushed aside the money, and he was quite aghast when Roberjot replied: "Count out the amount you owe me, if you please, and take the rest away."

"You are jesting, surely," said the architect.

"I never spoke more seriously," was the reply.

"Don't you understand me, my boy—don't you realize that I wish to share my profits with you——"

The lawyer angrily interrupted the speaker: "Your persistence, sir, is an insult."

The architect's face flushed. "Roberjot, you are hard—very hard. I have been guilty of a very great—imprudence; but it seems to me that when I repair——"

The lawyer laughed. "How can you repair what you have done, except by making me an accomplice of a forgery? That will do. Pay me what you owe me and let us have done with each other. We will not discuss the matter—since we should never understand each other."

This was quite true, for the architect was utterly bewildered. He counted out a hundred and eighty thousand francs, and laid that amount in notes before M. Roberjot. "Here is the money," he said.

"Very well," was the reply.

M. Verdale shrugged his shoulders. "If you intend to take this tone," he said, "I have to ask that you will return the letter I wrote you."

But Monsieur Roberjot started up. "No!" he exclaimed, in a firm tone; "that letter is mine, and you shall never have it. I shall keep it!"

Trembling like a leaf, Madame Delorge looked and listened, almost forgetting the peculiarity of her position. Overwhelmed by this unexpected refusal, the architect literally swayed like a drunken man, and looked at his friend with haggard eyes for a moment or two in silence. Then he murmured: "You wish to frighten me, Roberjot, do you not? You wish to avenge yourself for the suspense I have kept you in? Admit it. It is impossible that you really intend to retain that letter."

"It is quite possible."

"But why?—for what end?"

"Because——"

"Do you intend to file a complaint, although I have returned you your money?"

"You know that I do not."

"What do you wish to do, then?"

"I have no explanations to make."

"Roberjot!"

The two men stood face to face—the lawyer cool and self-possessed, the other trembling nervously. "You must see," continued Verdale, "that it is quite impossible for me to leave my letter in your possession. It is too compromising for me."

"It ought never to have been written."

A silence ensued—so profound that Madame Delorge could hear the architect's laboured breathing. "To allow this devilish letter to remain in your hands is to give you the power that God alone possesses over mankind. It is to abandon my honour, my future, and my life to you; and also the life, honour, and future of my son. It is to give myself up to you bound hand and foot, to acknowledge myself your slave, your dog—your thing."

The lawyer did not answer.

"To leave this letter with you," continued his companion, "would be to relinquish hope, happiness, and repose for ever. To-day I am rich, to-morrow I shall be a millionaire; and within a year I shall be a man of influence. But a persistent voice will breathe in my ear the words, 'All you have gained—fortune, honour, and consideration, are at the mercy of this man. He has only to speak, and the edifice you have built with such pains will crumble to dust. To-morrow, we shall be arrayed against one another as enemies, for to-morrow the empire will be declared. You will be its determined adversary, and I its obstinate defender? What will happen? Will you come to me with this letter in your hand, and say to me: 'I forbid you to entertain such and such opinions?' or will you say, 'I command you to betray those whom you serve, and who believe in you——'"

With a quick gesture Roberjot interrupted him. "Do you realise," he asked, "that you are insulting me?"

The architect smiled grimly. "Will you tell me," he cried, "what you wish to do with this letter?"

"I keep it because I know what you are capable of. Your ambition is boundless, and nothing holds you in check; the recollection of this letter may possibly do so. You may recall it some time when you are about to attempt a similar transaction, and be restrained by it."

"Indeed! And what part do you suppose I am to play in the future? At this same time yesterday I hadn't a sou in the world."

"Be at ease; the letter will not leave my drawer."

The architect started forward so impetuously that Madame Delorge thought he was about to strike the lawyer. But no, he checked himself and said, quietly. "And this is your final decision?"

"Yes."

"And you wish me to leave you thus?"

Roberjot did not speak.

"Farewell," said M. Verdale, and taking up his hat and portfolio he walked towards the door, beyond Madame Delorge's range of view. Suddenly, however, he came back as if inspired by a new hope, and said, in a supplicating voice: "What can I do to get this letter? Shall I give twenty thousand francs to the poor—or twice that sum? Shall I found an hospital or a school? Speak!"

"I have nothing to say."

The architect tore his hair. "My friend, my school companion! shall I humiliate myself before you? Do you realize what it costs me?" Tears stood in his eyes as he spoke. "I admit my error—I confess it, and ask your pardon. In the name of your mother give me that letter."

The lawyer was moved, and Madame Delorge saw that he was inclined to yield, although he repeated his refusal. But the architect could no longer control himself. He leaped at the lawyer and seized him by the throat, crying: "The letter! give me the letter!—where is it? Answer me at once—or by the God that made me, you are a dead man!"

Fortunately Roberjot had not lost his self-possession. He shook off his adversary and rushed into the parlour, where the general's widow stood in dismay.

"Wretch!" cried the architect, "you shall not escape me!" And seizing a poniard which served as a paper-knife, he darted after the lawyer. But he found himself face to face with Madame Delorge. His terror was so great that he stood transfixed, shaking from head to foot. At the same moment, the servant who had heard the noise, hurried into the room. The architect looked wildly around him, and, throwing down his dagger, cried: "I'm lost! I'm lost!" and then fled like a madman.

The servant hastened to the assistance of his master, who had fallen on to a chair. So furious had been Verdale's grasp that the lawyer was fairly choking, and it was some time before he recovered complete consciousness. His first thought and look were then for Madame Delorge who, pale with emotion, stood close by his side. "Your courage has saved my life, madame," he said, and with his foot he pushed aside the weapon dropped by the architect.

"I will summon the police!" exclaimed the servant, but his master instantly forbade him to take any such step. "Moreover," he said, "if you wish to please me, you will not breathe a word of what has happened to any human being."

"But if that man comes back again," urged the servant.

"He will not come back again, you need not be disturbed," said the lawyer, with a faint smile. "He will send, however, for he has left behind him all that he holds most dear." And, so saying, he showed Madame Delorge the portfolio stuffed full of bank-notes. "Poor Verdale," he resumed, "as soon as he is himself again he will be terribly anxious."

But Madame Delorge did not smile. "Have you not been a little hard, sir—a little pitiless?"

"I! can you ask me such a question?"

"I most involuntarily heard the whole conversation, and I am sorry for the poor man. He has unquestionably been very guilty—but he repents."

"You don't know him!" interrupted the lawyer. "He will do the same thing to-morrow under similar circumstances. You thought him desperate. He was only angry at finding himself in my power—for I hold him with a firm grasp. These are the rascals who blackmail honest men. But this time the case will be reversed; for an honest man will blackmail a rascal in the interests of justice."

Madame Delorge shook her head. "No matter," she said; "the wisest course would have been to return the letter to him."

"And to let him do the same thing again?" asked the lawyer. "No, no," he continued, "it is with this pretty system that honest men are perpetually deceived; it will continue to be so until they make up their minds to punish the criminals themselves whenever they catch them in the act. I begin to feel sorry that I did not have Verdale arrested; it was a miserable weakness that restrained me. I was afraid of losing my money. I had a vague hope that if I waited patiently, I should get it again. You have no comprehension of that fellow. He has found his path easy to tread, and he will mount rapidly now. Before ten years have elapsed I expect to see him on the topmost rung of the social ladder—minister of public works, perhaps—and pocketing millions. He will hate me like death, and I ought to hold on to his letter, if only from motives of ordinary prudence."

But Madame Delorge did not seem convinced; and Roberjot added, after

a brief silence : "My strongest reason for resisting this rascal's entreaties was on your account. Verdale is the friend of your enemies, and—I am willing to wager my life—he has been the lover of the Baroness d'Eljonsen, and is still the confidant of Coutanceau and De Combelaine."

Madame Delorge colored, and was about to speak, when a ring at the bell resounded through the house.

"Can that be Verdale back again?" muttered the lawyer.

But at that moment his servant came in with a card, saying that a gentleman wished to see him for a moment on urgent business. M. Roberjot read the card aloud: "Dr. Buiron, President of the Sanitary Commission for the City of Paris."

"Dr. Buiron!" cried Madame Delorge. "He is the man who first gave me the idea that my husband had been assassinated, and then contradicted it."

"And you see, madame, that this contradiction has won him an official post." The lawyer then addressing his servant, said: "Show the gentleman into my study." He entered it himself, but left the door so that Madame Delorge could both see and hear the doctor. He had not changed, save that his stiffness and importance was increased. He bowed gravely, and in a pompous tone, began: "I am Monsieur Verdale's friend."

M. Roberjot's lips parted to say, "I am very sorry for you," but he restrained himself and uttered a simple—"ah!"

"He has sent me," continued the physician, "to ask you for a portfolio he left here by accident."

"And which contains a large sum of money?"

"Precisely, three hundred and sixty-two thousand francs in bank-notes and securities."

The doctor must have had a good conscience not to quiver—and he did not—under the look which the lawyer gave him, as he replied, "I am ready to hand you this portfolio and the money it contains, but I must have a receipt from you in return."

The doctor bowed acquiescence, and after verifying the contents of the portfolio, he gave a receipt in due form, and went off.

"There goes another no better than the first," said the lawyer, returning to Madame Delorge, who received him with great reserve and no little embarrassment. She had begun to realize the extent of M. Roberjot's interest in her, and so it was with great haste that she laid the object of her visit before him, and told him of the pension with which she had been threatened. But the lawyer could discover no way in which she could avoid this crowning insult.

"There is but one means," he said, "and that is doubtful. My election is almost certain. I can threaten Monsieur de Maumussy that if he persists I will inform the Chamber of the whole matter. But even then would any good come of it?"

Madame Delorge felt greatly discouraged when she left M. Roberjot. "And this," she said, "is the only man who can aid me. He is honorable and thoroughly good. And yet I cannot go to him, for I clearly see that he loves me."

XVIII.

HOWEVER, the widow's energy was too great to be daunted by any unforeseen obstacle. "I must learn to do without Monsieur Roberjot's assistance," she said to herself; "but my husband's murder will be none the less surely avenged."

This was now her dominant idea. She well knew that when the mind is always on the stretch, directed toward one end, its natural strength is quadrupled, and the weakest are gifted with a giant's strength. "We shall be compelled to wait for years!" Ducoudray had said to her. "I could wait for centuries," had been Madame Delorge's reply.

Her first care in moving from Passy to her new home, had been to arrange the general's study just as it had been at the villa. Furniture, hangings, curtains, all were the same, and to see the open desk, the cards, and half-finished letter, just as the general had left them, one would have thought him on the point of returning. One thing alone was different, and this was a matter that astonished the poor woman's few visitors. Across the general's portrait hung a sword, the one he had worn on the night of his death. It hung just as it had been brought to her, in its mud bespattered scabbard, sealed as it had been by the commissary of police at Passy. Not a day passed but what Madame Delorge showed it to her son, saying that it would be his right some day to break that seal, and that there hung the weapon he must use to avenge his father's murder. At each meal, whether there were guests or not, the general's chair was placed at the table, and his place set. At first M. Ducoudray's appetite had been taken away by what he considered a very lugubrious proceeding, but he had at last grown accustomed to the empty chair, which he said to himself was like an empty grave between himself and the widow.

Apart from these details never was a sorrow so unostentatiously displayed. The people residing in the same house, realized as they saw the widow looking so pale and cold, and surrounded by her children, that some great grief had befallen her; but they knew nothing of her story. They could elicit nothing from the faithful attendant Krauss, and the servant girl had been recently engaged, and could have told nothing even if she had been so inclined.

Madame Delorge had, moreover, adopted a style of life, the simplicity and economy of which were apparent to all lookers on—and they found little to gratify their curiosity. She rose early, and with her young servant put the rooms in order and prepared breakfast. Later in the day she took her seat near the general's desk and mended linen and clothes, whilst superintending the studies of her children. Twice a day Krauss escorted the two boys to school and home again. They were rarely heard in the house—and indeed their application to their studies was so great that Madame Delorge was frequently obliged to speak peremptorily to tear them from their books. Sunday alone changed the peaceful routine of their life, for Jean Cornevin—M. Ducoudray's adopted son—then came to pass the day with them; and, if the weather was fine, the old gentleman took the three boys into the country. He had grown accustomed to Jean's turbulence, of which he had once complained to M. Roberjot, and he now talked a great deal of the lad's vivacity and cleverness, of his skill with his pencil, and so on, declaring that the day would come when the boy would make his mark in the world as an artist. Sometimes Ducoudray induced Madame Delorge to be of the party; and then,

as the restaurants in the neighbourhood of Paris are beyond narrow purses, Krauss followed them, carrying a large basket full of provisions which they partook of seated on the grass.

Worthy M. Ducoudray had given his friend's widow one of those proofs of affection which are worth volumes of protestations. He had moved. For her sake he had abandoned Passy. He, the selfish egotist, had given up his pretty villa, the house which he had built to suit himself, his tastes and habits, and where everything which could render life easy and agreeable was to be found. One fine morning, without giving a hint of his intentions to anyone, he had established himself on the third floor of a house in the Rue Chaptal. He was by no means as comfortable as at Passy. But he lived only a few yards from Madame Delorge, and could pay her two visits every day. Without him the widow would certainly have felt inexpressibly lonely. All her husband's friends had been scattered by the *coup d'état*, exiled, reduced to flight, or living in the country. Of all the people she had been in the habit of seeing, she now only met two or three at rare intervals.

M. Roberjot came occasionally. Despite her wish to show him her gratitude for his kindness, she had received him in a way to make him understand that the hope he cherished could never be realized. On a par with M. Ducoudray, Madame Delorge's most frequent companion, was Madame Cornevin. By the advice of her benefactress, the groom's wife had left Montmartre and established herself in the Rue Pigale with her three daughters, Clarisse, Eulalie, and Louise. Her rent, of course, was very much larger than before. She paid four hundred francs per annum, which seemed enormous to her; but Madame Delorge had traced out a plan which rendered this expenditure indispensable. Madame Cornevin had been a very skilful seamstress before her marriage, and since her husband's disappearance she had placed herself under a fashionable dressmaker. There she recalled her previous skill, learned certain details of the trade, and obtained an idea of the fashions. "And when you are sure of yourself," said Madame Delorge, "you will take work to do at home, and your three daughters will sew with you. Monsieur Ducoudray and myself will find customers for you, and when your husband comes back his surprise will be great to find his wife at the head of a large establishment."

M. Ducoudray approved of this plan, and devoted considerable time and no small amount of money to searching for the lost man, who was the only witness of the death of General Delorge. A most difficult task it was—more difficult and more perilous than he had imagined. To hunt up a person whom you have no trace of is difficult enough when you can act openly, use the newspapers and the subtle army of European police. What must it be, then, when you have to act alone, when you are obliged to shroud each step in mystery, and act in deadly fear of the Rue de Jerusalem! And this was precisely Ducoudray's position—and yet he had one great chance. Cornevin—admitting that he lived, and nothing proved this better than the behaviour of Flora Misri—must be imprisoned somewhere; for if he were free he would of course, hasten to his wife and children, whom he adored, and whom he must imagine had been reduced to frightful misery. It was clear, too, that he must be most carefully guarded, as otherwise he would have given signs of life by means of a letter, a note, or a word.

M. Ducoudray had his agents at work, half a dozen of those fellows whom the police are obliged to dismiss from time to time, and who afterwards resort to the "private inquiry" business. Each week the worthy man drew several bank notes from his pocket merely to hear the words, "We are on the

track." Then he would rub his hands, without remembering how many times he had laughed at this old phrase. These proceedings were the habitual subject of his conversation with Madame Delorge, except when Madame Cornevin was present—for it was considered advisable that the poor woman should not be kept in suspense by hearing of the various measures taken to find her husband. It would have only meant keeping her wound for ever open.

Madame Cornevin, on her side, however, was also at work. Hard as it was for her, she had gone to see her sister again, and implored her to use her influence with M. de Combelaïne. But at the first words Flora Misri had flown into a violent rage. "I admit," she said, "that Victor is all powerful. He has obtained a tobacco shop for my mother, and a place for my father, where he has nothing to do. But Victor would be very stupid to serve people who only wish to injure him. What are you doing this very day? You are spending your whole time with the wife of that general whom Victor killed in a duel—a mad woman, who would set the world on fire for the sake of injuring us! What are you two plotting, with the aid of that old fellow who never leaves you? Do you think we know no hing of your performances?"

This interview, on being reported to Madame Delorge, gave her a great deal to think of, "De Combelaïne and Madame Misri have penetrated your secret," she said to her old friend Ducoudray; "they have heard of your investigations."

"It is impossible," he said, "for I have never opened my lips to a human being." He determined, however, to take counsel of M. Roberjot.

"You are deceived," said the lawyer, instantly. "The men whom you are paying are employed by De Combelaïne also. Spies who don't work for both sides would not be spies. Remember what I say."

The good man was thunderstruck, but convinced. "I will dismiss them this very evening!" he cried, going off in high dudgeon at the thought he had been so fooled.

Nothing annoyed M. Roberjot more than these awkward attempts on Ducoudray's part, for he, too, was trying to find Laurent Cornevin. The fact that he was a member of the opposition had placed him in relation with a large number of voluntary exiles, and with many who were proscribed. He had interested them in the fate of the poor groom, by explaining to them the importance of his testimony, and he had strong hopes of ascertaining what he wanted to know through them.

Meantime, however, the government, which so many prophets had declared would collapse before the end of the month, seemed to be stronger than ever. The newspapers were curbed and silent, so were the deputies; not a discordant voice had troubled the flow of blessings and flattery poured upon the prince-president. His journey through the departments, arranged by an able manager, proved one long ovation, and on returning to Paris, he walked under a triumphal arch, while a fashionable barber displayed a transparency with the inscription, "*Ave Caesar.*" Soon indeed the Senate hailed the prince as emperor, and a *plébiscite* consecrated the empire.

The reign of Napoleon III. began. He formed a court after the model of his uncle's. Courtiers eager for places, crowded around him. M. de Combelaïne received a post of responsibility; De Maumussy scattered money to the winds, Madame d'Eljonsen rented a palace while waiting to build; M. Verdale became one of the official architects, and Dr. Buiron one of the physicians attached to the court.

"Where will they stop!" cried M. Ducoudray in dismay.

But Madame Delorge was very calm.

"The higher they climb," she answered, "the greater their fall will be. God is just. Patience!"

But, recognized by all the powers of Europe, called "cousin and brother" by the King of Prussia and "good friend" by the Emperor of Russia, Louis Napoleon had reason to believe that the throne of December was strongly built, and that he might dream in peace of founding a dynasty. One morning, in January, 1853, M. Ducoudray appeared rather earlier than usual in Madame Delorge's drawing-room with a newspaper in his hand. "Well!" he cried, "it is all settled; we are to have a superb wedding! The emperor is to be married." It was true, for at this same hour all Paris was discussing the manifesto which Louis Napoleon had issued, and which began: "I yield to the wish so often manifested by my country, and announce my marriage——"

"And whom does he marry?" asked Madame Delorge.

"A young Spaniard," was the reply, "Mademoiselle Eugénie de Montijo, Comtesse de Téba."

Mademoiselle de Montijo was not unknown to the Parisians, for during the presidency the attention of the *habitués* of the opera had often been turned to a box, in which sat a woman of mature age and ungracious countenance, and a young girl who, despite the smallest of eyes, was none the less exceedingly beautiful. The two ladies were the Countess de Montijo and her daughter. It was very soon noticed that their names always figured on the list of guests at all the presidential *fêtes*, either at Compiègne or at Fontainebleau. The chroniclers of the court never ceased to sing the merits and graces of the young Spaniard, lauding the abundance of her fair hair and the whiteness of her complexion. Considerable anxiety was felt, if not expressed respecting the queen of the presidential *fêtes*, and at last public curiosity was excited to such a degree that crowds gathered before any shop she was known to be in, and to escape notice she gave up attending the opera. Her position at court was uncertain enough, however, for many people, including those who had every reason to wish to penetrate their master's secrets, to believe that amorganatic marriage had been contracted between herself and the emperor. The official announcement of the wedding, accordingly amazed the Parisians, and, notwithstanding the many excellent reasons alleged in the manifesto, the news was coldly received.

Many people regarded the marriage as so extraordinary that they explained it as an act of pique on the emperor's part. They related how Louis Napoleon, in search of a wife, had sent ambassadors to Germany—that inexhaustible nursery for marriageable princesses—where several powers had been applied to, but not one found willing to accept his overtures. It was said that he had in vain asked for the hand of the daughter of Prince Wasa, son of Charles XIII. of Sweden, and that a princess of Hohenzollern had also been refused him.

"This may all be true," said M. Ducoudray; "but all the same, I don't see why an emperor can't, like any simple citizen, marry the woman he likes best."

This opinion, reasonable as it may seem, was by no means that of the emperor's family. There were rumours of violent scenes, and it was said the Princess Mathilde had thrown herself at her cousin's feet imploring him, in the name of the most sacred interests of his family, not to contract such an alliance. However, this repugnance and these objections, if they really

existed, did not prevent the Princess Mathilde from carrying the bride's train, when the wedding day came.

Paris was much excited over the bride's *trousseau*. A certain lace dress caused an immense amount of gossip—and the Dangeaus of the new *régime* sighed that there was not time to modify the somewhat superannuated setting of the crown diamonds. The city of Paris voted six hundred thousand francs for the presentation of a necklace to the new empress, but Mademoiselle de Montijo wrote to the prefect to ask him to devote this sum to charity. Finally, on the 20th of January, 1853, the "civil" wedding took place at the Tuileries. The grand master of the ceremonies went with two court carriages for the imperial *fiancée*. The grand chamberlain, attended by the principal officers of the court, waited at the foot of the staircase of the Pavilion of Flora, to lead her into the private drawing-room where the emperor, Prince Jérôme and other members of his family, the cardinals, ambassadors, and ministers-plenipotentiary then in Paris were assembled. Napoleon III. wore the uniform of a general, with the Order of the Golden Fleece, while on her side the future empress wore a robe of point d'Alençon over a white satin skirt, while round her throat was the necklace ordered by the city of Paris, and which the emperor had purchased and presented to her. At nine o'clock the grand master of the ceremonies, who had received his orders from the emperor, led the way to the Salle des Maréchaux, where the civil wedding was to take place. It proved a tedious ceremony, so many persons had to sign their names!

But, at last, when no one else advanced to take up the pen the cortege moved on to the Salle de Spectacle, where the performers from the Opera House were waiting to execute a cantata, the words of which had been written by Méry, whilst Auber had composed the music:—

"A notre impératrice aux doux climats choisie,
Chantez avec des voix qui sachent nous ravir,
Les airs que redira l'écho d'Andalousie
Aux collines du Gage et du Guadalquivir.

"Espagne bien-aimée,
Où le ciel est vermeil.
C'est toi qui l'as formé
D'un rayon de soleil—"

On the following day, January, 30th, an enormous crowd thronged the streets and gathered in the neighbourhood of Notre Dame, where the religious ceremony of marriage was to take place. A little before noon the gates of the Tuileries opened to allow of the egress of a couple of carriages, which old Parisians recognized as having seen at the coronation of Napoleon I. and the baptism of the King of Rome. The emperor and empress were in the first vehicle and Prince Napoleon and Prince Jérôme in the second one. Salutes were fired when the imperial pair returned from the ceremony, and showed themselves on the grand balcony of the Tuileries, and that evening, when dinner was over, a wedding cantata, composed by Madame Mélanie Waldor, was sung by the performers of the Opéra Comique, attired in Spanish costumes,

"Célestes concerts,
Douce harmonie,
Glissez dans les airs :
Chantez la grace unie
 Augénie,
Chantez Eugénie
Et les amours
Durant toujours."

It was M. Ducoudray who acquainted Madame Delorge with all these particulars. A Parisian to the marrow of his bones, the good man prided himself on knowing everything that took place. Whenever five or six hundred open-mouthed spectators gathered together, one was sure to see him in the first row. It was thus that for fifty years he had witnessed every public event in France. He had seen the entrance of the allies in 1814, and the return from Elba the next year; he had seen Louis XVIII. and Charles X., Louis Philippe and the Republic of 1848. This was why, when he looked on the procession of Napoleon III. and the new empress, he said to himself: "Pshaw! This will end like all the rest."

During this marriage festival he was not so much struck by the grave and solemn air of M. de Combelaïne and the Viscount de Maumussy as they drove by in their carriages, as by the lack of enthusiasm shown by the populace. The scene-shifters of the ovation, the prompters and stage managers had all performed their tasks, no doubt, for the crowd was immense, and the railway lines had brought thousands of provincials to Paris—provincials who crushed and hustled the Parisians on the streets and boulevards; but this crowd was utterly unmoved—and, in fact, if there was any emotion at all, it was astonishment mingled with fear. Here and there judiciously scattered along the line of the procession were groups chosen to utter shouts of welcome and acclamations, but they aroused no echo. These official applauders awakened no enthusiasm.

In addition to the ordered poems, there were others of a very different flavour. It is when the liberty of the press is most restricted that anonymous pamphlets, shameful placards, and unworthy calumnies, are most widely circulated. What would have made the subject of an article couched in guarded language, then becomes the theme of a song which literally respects nothing. The article would have been forgotten in twenty-four hours, but the song lingers in memory and flies on the wings of some popular melody to the farthest limits of France, penetrating even to the most secluded villages. Mademoiselle de Montijo's early youth had not been without a dash of romance and a spice of adventure, and thus it offered a broad field for calumny and misrepresentation. Her mother, liking movement, change, and travel, life at watering-places, *fêtes*, and theatrical performances, had for several years dragged her from place to place—to London, Paris, and Pau, and through Germany. Parisians are prejudiced, and provincial Frenchmen even more so—and they cannot accept the free manners of foreign girls. They could not deny the beauty of the emperor's wife, but they insisted on its being marred by defects. Her warmest adherents called her good and kind, but far from clever; firm, but headstrong; simple, but coquettish; bigoted, rather than religious; *dévot*e, in fact, after the unreasoning fashion of a woman of her nation. "She r-calls Marie-Antoinette, whom she professes to adore," said some of those dangerous friends whose praise conceals a treachery—intentional or otherwise. On the other hand, people of sense waited before they made up their minds—but they waited with anxiety, knowing the fatal influence which the example of a young and beautiful sovereign must exercise over the manners and morals of her time.

The new empress's position was a most difficult one in a court which dated from yesterday. She was surrounded by enemies, snares and ambushes; she found herself among people who were so astonished to see her where she was that they could hardly look at her without a laugh. To pass so abruptly from a roving life to the inexorable obligations of a throne

is something of a trial to a young woman. To find herself all at once the centre of observation, to be always *en scène*, to speak to everyone about everything, to occupy herself with fashions and politics, to show herself serious and frivolous, to be a woman of the world and a woman of heart, to keep the secret of her impressions, her sympathies and likings, and surmount her aversions, is indeed a formidable task. The Empress Eugénie did not succeed. If her courtiers told her she was popular, they deceived her—she never was. In vain did she multiply her benevolent works, her charitable institutions; she never touched the heart of the people. Sceptical and mocking France only respects the solemn. The French only understand a queen moving about in brocade and train, with a majestic step, and wearing a golden-jewelled crown, and they were astonished to see the empress in a short ruffled skirt, with high-heeled boots, and a pretty fresh hat, such as all the women about her wore on their heads. “Her simplicity is admirable,” cried her partisans.

“No dignity!” grumbled the others.

It may here be remarked that the husbands whose wives adopted this admirable simplicity found it very costly. They discovered that all these pretty little dresses of inexpensive materials trimmed and scalloped, flounced and laced, ended by reason of their number, in being ten times dearer than the richer toilettes of other times. However, husbands were told that this was the fashion, and what could they say in reply? They grumbled at first, and then they became accustomed to it—their wives must do like other women of course. Thus the dressmakers had a glorious harvest, and one of them a “man milliner,” gave himself such airs of importance, that one was reminded of the mantuamaker who, in the days of Marie Antoinette, so proudly exclaimed: “Her majesty and I have been at work together!”

Never had such extravagance been known—families were first ruined, and then corrupted—for no one chose to be eclipsed. Every frog swelled out in hopes of equalling the ox. Many of them burst. Enormous fortunes were made, and how? no one knew, but this sudden luxury aroused strange suspicions. When Combelaïne rolled past in his brougham, drawn by a pair of magnificent horses—Combelaïne, whom all Paris had seen in shoes down at heel—when Maumussy, once driven by his creditors from the boulevard, now shone forth as a gorgeous vision, and Madame d’Eljonsen, now the Princess d’Eljonsen, astonished all Paris by the magnificence of her *fêtes*—folks involuntarily clapped their hands on their pockets and said: “Where the deuce do these people get all their money?”

Matters, indeed, came to such a pass, that the official *Moniteur* was compelled to deny certain infamous statements which were circulated—reports spread on the Bourse and elsewhere respecting certain financial operations that high functionaries were accused of dabbling in. And, meantime, the price of everything went up, and money seemed to decrease in value. Worthy M. Ducoudray, who had been considered wealthy, began to think he had made a great mistake in retiring from business with so little. “If this goes on!” he sometimes said, “I shall end by not having enough to buy dry bread.”

XIX.

"BUT it will not last—there is no need for alarm!" said various political prophets, in tones of calm confidence. It is true that it would have been quite impossible for them to say on what they founded their certainty. During these first years of the empire the most preposterous tales were circulated. At every turning you met people who said to you mysteriously, "You have heard the news, I presume. The empire won't last another month. The money's running low—the next instalment of interest on the National Debt will not be paid!"

However, Madame Delorge was not the sort of person to be moved by these puerilities; and if M. Ducoudray was inclined to argue her into credulity, she had M. Roberjot to hold her firm, for he was in a better position than almost anyone else to judge of the situation and the march of events. He had been elected and had taken his seat as a deputy. Bitter opponent as he was of the empire, he had not yet reached the point when it is necessary to wear those spectacles which shorten the vision. So he shook his head sadly as he said: "The empire will last for years, and if a war should chance to come, and a successful one, the opposition will be well nigh powerless."

M. Roberjot, like all men of sense, realized that war was the very essence of the empire. No doubt, Napoleon III. had said at Bordeaux: "The empire is peace." But it was clear that this was a mere saying—one of those promises that there is no risk in uttering, and which one can afterwards keep or break as one pleases. It was in the past that the real sentiments of the emperor were to be looked for—in his proclamations at Boulogne and Strasbourg, and still more in his replies before the Chamber of Peers during his trial. There, speaking to his judges, but addressing France, he had exclaimed: "I represent a principle, a cause, and a defeat. The principle is the sovereignty of the people, the cause is that of the empire, the defeat, Waterloo. The principle you have admitted, the cause you have served, the defeat you burn to avenge."

"And Napoleon III. will avenge it," said his partisans, boastfully, "and in exchange for the sterile liberties which he takes from France, he will give her the prestige of military glory."

Public opinion was therefore well prepared when it became known that France was going to war with Russia. England was this time our ally; her soldiers were to fight side by side with ours. Paris was all astir, but not with doubt or anxiety. We could only be conquerors. And, in truth, the Second Empire soon had a victory to chronicle—one gained by a man of the *coup d'état*, the Marshal de Saint-Arnaud. He was happy in dying soon afterwards with a flag for his winding sheet. But French impatience needed more than this victory of the Alma, and so Paris welcomed as certain, as incontestable, a despatch which had been brought, it was said, by a Cossack, and which announced the fall of Sebastopol. It was, indeed, chronicled by the official journal, whereupon stock rose, and Paris illuminated; but the next day it was understood that the Cossack was a financial *canard*, and that Sebastopol stood as firm as a rock. However, beyond causing large sums of money to change hands this false report had no evil consequences. French impatience only advanced events. After an heroic resistance, Sebastopol fell into our power, and following almost immediately on this glorious news

came the intelligence that the Emperor of Russia was at the point of death, that a congress would unite at Paris, and that peace would be signed against the desires of England.

Whilst the negotiations were pending, an event took place of great importance to the imperial family, one which filled all those, who owed their fortunes to the empire, with joy. It was officially announced that the empress was in an interesting condition, and on the 15th of March, 1856, the President of the Corps Législatif informed his colleagues that her majesty was at that moment suffering the pangs of childbirth. The most contradictory reports were at once circulated. It was said that the empress was very ill, that the accoucheur of the English queen, who had arrived in the night, despaired of her life. Others declared that the child—a girl—was dying. The truth was that, after considerable suffering, the empress had been delivered of a boy, at about three o'clock in the afternoon.

"Thus is the dynasty perpetuated!" said the imperial journals, and, in fact, everything smiled on the emperor, and the empire was at the height of its power. On the day when the plenipotentiaries came in full uniform to the Tuileries to present the treaty of Paris, they had signed, Napoleon III. appeared to be the arbiter of Europe.

"Why do you talk to me of Providence and divine justice?" said M. Ducoudray, that evening, to Madame Delorge, who had need of all her strength and hope in these days. If she had considered her enemies as beyond her reach on the morrow of the *coup d'état*, what was she to think now, when their fortune, allied to that of the empire, seemed imperishable.

After years of incessant investigation, the fate of Laurent Cornevin was still shrouded in mystery, and Roberjot himself said: "We have been misled by Flora Misri's words. Poor Laurent must have been murdered long since."

This was also the conviction of Cornevin's wife, who, after long hoping against hope, now put on her bills "The Widow Cornevin," for she had her bills now. The advice given by Madame Delorge had brought her happiness and prosperity. Her small establishment had succeeded to a degree that surpassed all expectations. Hardly had she set up in business for herself than customers of the best class came to her so rapidly that she was obliged to take two assistants, in addition to her daughters, and then four more. Soon, moreover, she had to employ a forewoman, for she had as much as she could do to receive customers and take their measures and try on their dresses. Then the rooms in the Rue Pigale were found to be too small, and, after much hesitation, she yielded to the solicitations of Madame Delorge and M. Ducoudray, and took another apartment in the Chaussée d'Antin, at an enormous rental. It was the rent which had caused her to hesitate, for like all persons who have known much trouble, she distrusted prosperity, regarding all the favours of fortune as so many snares. "Suppose I should be unable to pay this rent!" she said to her friends. "Why not be content when one is doing well?"

But M. Ducoudray would not listen to this reasoning. "Where," he asked, "would he be now if he had confined himself to that narrow shop where his parents had vegetated for fifty years, making both ends meet with infinite difficulty. No, no," he continued, "you must go on. I will come to the rescue if you need me."

And he insisted on her accepting a loan of a thousand crowns, with which to move and establish herself, for he wished that everything should be perfect in the new establishment she started, and in harmony with the

fashionable locality. So she had a reception-room, with a handsome carpet, chandelier, and mirrors. And the public did honour to her in a fashion which flattered the experience of the old merchant. In vain did Madame Cornevin raise her prices; all her former customers followed, new ones came crowding in, and she speedily became one of the fashionable dressmakers. So that on the third anniversary of her installation, when she made out her accounts on the 31st of December, she found that she had made, in the past twelve months, more than twenty thousand francs, and that when every bill was paid she would have eight thousand to invest. And yet her expenses had greatly increased, for she no longer accepted the allowance made her by Madame Delorge, but in fact insisted on paying a certain amount towards the expenses of her son Léon, who was being brought up with Raymond. She also defrayed half the amount of her son Jean's bills. She no longer allowed her daughters to sew all day, but sent them to school in the neighbourhood, where they received that practical education which is essential in France to a merchant's wife. For herself, the courageous woman spent nothing. She reproached herself even for the few francs which she paid every month to an old teacher, who, each evening after the departure of her workwomen, came to give her a lesson, for she felt the necessity of raising herself to the level of her new position. She did not wish her children to blush for her later on, and refrain from showing her letters, because they were misspelt.

She was an example of what an ordinary intelligence, backed up by a strong will, can accomplish. No one that ever saw her in her handsome *salon* receiving her noble and elegant clients would have recognised the brave and honest but somewhat coarse housekeeper of Montmartre, who could be seen twice a week going up the Rue Mercadet with her bundle of wet linen which she had just washed at the public wash-house, and which she meant to dry at her window. Her constant companionship with Madame Delorge had given her an air and manner and certain little ways which no one would have imagined her capable of. She was not out of place in the house of her protectress. She was very reserved and silent when any guests were present, and she simply appeared to be a woman of extreme timidity. But there was no prosperity capable of effacing from her memory all that she had suffered and the immense loss she had sustained. Six years after the disappearance of her husband she would turn pale and her superb black eyes would flash fire at the very sound of the Count de Combelaïne's name. "Those who pretend that Time effaces all," she said, "have never known what it is to love or to hate." To her, indeed, Time was as nothing.

One Sunday, in 1857, it was arranged she should dine at her friend's with M. Ducoudray and the children. She came in late, and so agitated that she could hardly speak. She had just met Grollet, the employé in the Elysée stables, whom MM. de Maumussy and de Combelaïne had so skilfully substituted for Laurent Cornevin. "It was in the Rue Blanche that I met him," she said, in answer to the questions of her friends. "I knew him when he turned the corner, though I had not seen him since the day when he offered me breakfast, albeit he was already meditating his frightful treason. He is a very different person now. He looks like a wealthy shop-keeper. He wears a watch-chain with links as big as finger-rings, and a shirt with diamond studs. He knew me, too. He came up to me and looked at me from head to foot with a most impudent expression. 'Upon my life!' he said, 'we are dressed like a duchess—we make silk dresses nowadays, don't we? I am delighted to see that we have found worthy

successors to poor Cornevin!' His tone and look were so insulting that tears of anger came to my eyes. But I kept them back. I wished to know what he was doing, and I asked him several questions. Time has brought him good luck apparently, and the blood-money of my poor Laurent has increased in his hands. He left the Elysée after the *coup d'état* and started a livery stable, as he knew his business and is skilful. As he had powerful protectors his business has prospered, and he is now at the head of one of the most important establishments in Paris. Nor is this all. He is associated with an architect of fabulous wealth—a man named Verdale. They two buy land and houses where the new streets are going to be cut, and as the architect knows everything that is planned in the way of improvements, they make as much money as they like."

"Too prudent to confide to anyone the secret she had suppressed, Madame Delorge was the only person present who knew the origin of the architect's great fortune, and she alone could wonder at that mysterious law which binds rascals together. "But is the architect after all so very wealthy?" she asked M. Roberjot at his first visit.

"My good friend Verdale," he replied, in that tone of biting irony which made him so many enemies—"my dear and honourable classmate ought to be and is undoubtedly fabulously rich. He has put a *de* before his name already, and some fine morning he will awake a baron, and decorated. I saw his card the other day—it was 'A. de Verdale,'"

Madame Delorge looked at her adviser in amazement. "Do you see this man nowadays?" she asked.

"He comes to see me sometimes."

"What! in spite of that terrible letter?"

"On account of that terrible letter. He comes regularly every six months to buy it, and at each visit he offers me a little higher price than before. The last time he named 500,000 francs." The enormity of the sum took away his companion's breath. "Why are you so astonished?" asked the lawyer. "That is not such a very large sum for my friend. Has he not the Princess d'Eljonsen as his Egeria? She is a lady who is very subject to dreams. As soon as she has one, she sends for her architect, and when he appears she says 'Verdale, I saw a new street in my dreams; it run from such a point to such another, and passed by certain places.' 'Very well, princess,' says my dear friend. And at once, without the smallest hesitation, he begins to buy all the estates he can get hold of on the line the princess has indicated. And he does wisely, for the street is decided on shortly afterwards. My Verdale is acute; he gets superb indemnities from the municipality, hands over a portion of the proceeds to the princess, and the thing is done."

Madame Delorge looked at M. Roberjot with sincere admiration. We are ready to admit to our readers that there was nothing in his conduct which could be called heroic, but she had lived too long not to know that in our days such disinterestedness as he had displayed in refusing a share of Verdale's money is rare, and that it is not every one who relinquishes an enormous sum which might have been accepted without danger, and without injuring anyone. She extended her hand. "You have done nobly, sir," she said, "and I thank you!"

But the lawyer hardly dared touch her fingers, for he, too, had resisted the dissolving action of Time. He had renounced all hope of being loved by Madame Delorge, but he had never ceased to love her; and he had the satisfaction of seeing that events had served him better than he had dared to

hope. The cruel pecuniary cares which had embittered Madame Delorge's days, and had rendered her nights sleepless during the first months of her widowhood, had disappeared—comfort and ease had returned to her fireside, for she was no longer hampered by the annuity she allowed Madame Cornevin. Léon cost her nearly nothing, and finally two unexpected legacies had doubled her capital. The first of these had come from the father of her husband. The poor man had not long survived the death of his son, who was his pride and his joy. He had talked of living with his daughter-in-law, but when the time came for him to leave the farm where he had resided so many years, his courage failed him. He lived a few months longer, and when he died he bequeathed sixty thousand francs to his daughter-in-law. The second inheritance she received came from Mademoiselle de la Roche-cordeau, and was most unexpected, for twice a day during fifteen years the old lady had sworn that she would throw her fortune into the Loire rather than leave a farthing of it to her niece. Unfortunately for her charitable intentions she had, although a *dévot*e, so terrible a fear of death that she could never decide to make a will. "It will be time," she always said, "to call in a notary when I feel my end approaching."

She did not feel it, however; for one evening when she had dined more heavily than usual, she flew into one of those fits of anger which were not uncommon with her, and was suddenly struck down by apoplexy. She only had time to murmur, "I am dying, and Elizabeth will have everything!"

And Elizabeth did have nearly all; for, as the nearest relative, she received seven-tenths of what her aunt left, or about 150,000 francs. She accepted this money, and explained to her son her reasons for doing so. "I believe, my boy," she remarked, moreover; "that this fortune will never induce you to imitate those young men who dissipate their money and health in vulgar pleasures—nor ought it ever induce you to neglect the sacred duties you are called upon to fulfill."

These words were almost exactly the same that Madame Cornevin repeated to her son each time she found herself with him. "Remember that your father has been cowardly assassinated by wretches whose crime he had detected, and that we do not even know what has become of his body."

Perhaps M. de Combelaïne and M. de Maumussy would have been surprised had they realized the change which eight years had wrought in these two women, whom they considered weak, friendless, and poor. They were no longer so. They were both nearly rich—rich enough, at all events, to pay well for their vengeance. Their children, who had been a heavy charge, were now a support. Raymond Delorge, Léon and Jean Cornevin, were nearly men—and the hour was nigh when the hopes of Madame Delorge might prove realities rather than chimeras.

Part III

RAYMOND.

I.

It was a proud and happy day to the two mothers when they contemplated their sons, and said to each other: Our task is fulfilled, and we can wait in peace for the hour we desire. We may now delegate the struggle to our children. We may die, perhaps, but the task we have undertaken will be carried on by arms more robust than our own. Their pride and their confidence were certainly well founded. Eleven years had passed since that bloody catastrophe at the Elysée. It was now the close of 1863. Raymond and Léon were on the point of leaving the Polytechnic School, where they had studied together. They had worked hard, with that obstinate perseverance which is occasionally a characteristic of youth, and their scholastic career had proved one long success. The two names, Delorge and Cornevin, linked together year after year at prizeday celebrations, at last attracted the notice of the few Parisians who knew anything of contemporary history. If that of Cornevin was new to them, that of Delorge seemed familiar. "Delorge!" they said; "where have we heard that name before? Wait a moment! Was it not that of the general whose mysterious death made so slight a stir at the time of the *coup d'état*, and who was said to have been killed in a duel by M. de Combelaïne?"

The fact is that neither Léon nor Raymond, in spite of Madame Delorge's caution, had been perfectly discreet. They had their boyish friendships, and could not avoid alluding to the past, or speaking of their present hatred, thirst for vengeance, and hopes for the future. The friends in whom they confided often repeated the dramatic story to their parents at home.

At the grand distribution of prizes, which followed the competition between the State schools in Paris, in 1859, Raymond took first honours, and his success was made the occasion for a noisy outbreak. The young fellows all rose, waved their caps, and shouted, "Bravo, Delorge! Three cheers for the son of General Delorge!" And they kept this up with such persistence, that the Minister of Public Instruction turned deadly pale. This manifestation was annoying and absurd, declared the semi-official newspaper, the *Constitutionnel*, and if we had the honour of managing the school to which young Delorge belongs, we should request this precocious disturber of the public peace, and his friends, to finish their studies elsewhere.

However, the next day, the head reporter of an opposition journal called on Madame Delorge, and begged her to tell him all she knew of the circumstances of her husband's death. "He proposed," he said, "to start an agitation which would prove useful to the cause of liberty, and very probably result in a full inquiry being made."

M. Ducoudray, who was present at this interview, was unable to hide his satisfaction, "A splendid chance!" he whispered in the widow's ears.

But she did not so regard it. It seemed to her that it would be profanation to abandon her husband's pure name to newspaper warfare. She shuddered at the idea, and implored the journalist to relinquish his plan. "No, no, sir," she said; "let the dead sleep in peace!"

After this the boys resumed their studies, and finally left the Polytechnic School with highly creditable honours. They were just twenty, but they seemed older than their years. Tall, broad-shouldered, of herculean strength, like his father, young Cornevin, with his fair skin, light hair, and calm composure, was often taken for an Englishman. Although quite capable of an act of folly, he was one of those young fellows who control themselves, and go on to the very end, imperturbably and methodically. Very different was Raymond, who was remarkably good-looking, tall and dark-haired, with pale cheeks, and flashing eyes, and all the grace and fascination of a southerner; he was endowed, too, with a voice and eloquence of language, which thrilled all who heard him. He was full of enthusiasm, capable of prodigious feats, but easily discouraged. His quick, vivacious mind conceived most brilliant projects, started them well, and managed them wisely for a time, but at the first check he lost his head. In presence of an obstacle which Léon would have struggled with and conquered, he retreated helplessly! Jean Cornevin described him well when he said: "Raymond has the courage of a hero, the nerves of a woman, and the sensibility of a child."

Jean, on his side, was totally unlike both his brother and young Delorge. He had never been a brilliant student. At seventeen indeed he threw off school-yoke, delaring that he had had enough of it, and in future should do nothing but paint and draw. Short and dark, plain, but for his eyes which flashed with wit and humour, Jean Cornevin concealed under an air of affected carelessness a very keen intelligence, remarkable ability, and unbounded ambition. Prompt to seize the ridiculous side of things, and having a pitiless tongue, he was in the habit of saying that he should make his enemies help him attain his ends.

However, great as was the diversity of these young men's temperaments and ideas, it did not prevent them from feeling the most hearty affection for one another. One tie united them—stronger even than those of relationship—a common hatred and common sorrow. They often disagreed in their discussions as to the means to be adopted to reach the goal—but the object before them was the same. They were each determined to make any sacrifice to punish the scoundrels who had robbed them of their fathers. Chivalric Delorge would cry out: "I shall fight my enemies openly, in broad daylight!" While cold, methodical Léon would say: "We must learn to watch for the propitious occasion which never fails to come to patient men."

Jean, who was at once incapable of moderation, and full of wrath, then exclaimed in his turn: "Why do you talk, Raymond, of fighting in broad daylight? Was it not in the dark that our fathers were slain? With such enemies no night is too dark, and no weapons are disloyal. I would become the boon companion of convicts, if it were necessary to achieve my purpose. And you, Léon, enrage me by preaching patience. To wait is simply to allow these fellows to enjoy their crime in peace."

He acted on these opinions with so much energy that at eighteen he was involved in that famous plot of the Bois de Bologne, the discovery of which placed thirty-seven persons in the dock, a dozen of whom were transported to Lambessa. What rendered Jean Cornevin's situation extremely unpleasant was, that when his room was searched a series of sketches were

found, called "The Panthéon of the Second Empire." They caricatured all the leading men of the times, and "their wickedness," said the Commissary of Police, in his report, "made me shudder with indignation."

However, M. Roberjot took active steps to liberate this precocious conspirator, and was successful. "You see now," said his brother to him when he was released from the Conciergerie where he had been detained for some weeks—"You see now what your mad precipitation leads you to. You are henceforth a marked man, and we, too, as your companions, may always consider ourselves under the eye of the police. And it is all the more stupid," continued Léon, "for the empire has reached its zenith, and has nothing to do but to descend."

To say this was bold, if not premature—for there were as yet but few clear-sighted people who could detect the rottenness beneath the seeming prosperity of the reign of Napoleon III. The very excess of this seeming prosperity was one great cause of ruin. For it is not in vain that brutal passions are over-stimulated—whether they be sensual appetites or a thirst for gold. Léon, being an attentive and intelligent observer, could detect the embarrassment which certain participators in the *coup d'état* were now causing the government by their cupidity. He knew that the Minister of the Interior, M. Billaud, had issued a circular, in which he alluded to certain individuals who, boasting of an influence they had never possessed, succeeded in gaining a large income by demanding a tithe from the promoters of all great enterprises. This circular, as may be imagined, had caused much talk. "Who are these certain individuals?" people asked, inquisitively.

Then the Minister of War in his turn launched a circular "to prevent the officers of the army from applying too often to the emperor for money."

"Well! well!" muttered the public, "is our ruler going to desert the army!"

The truth is, the emperor had a perception of the danger. When Ponsard brought out his comedy, "*La Bourse*,"—which pilloried Stock Exchange speculators—at the Théâtre Français, Napoleon III. wrote to him to congratulate him, at the same time begging him to bring all his talent to bear against the fatal passion of gambling. Similar congratulations were also sent to M. Oscar de Vallée, after the publication of his book, "*Les Manieurs d'Argent*," which dealt with the same subject. But what could a comedy, a book, and two imperial letters do towards curbing speculation? Many persons who speculated in stocks hardly possessed a competence. Meantime prices were steadily going up. The huge houses by which Verdale and his friends were pocketing enormous sums, occasioned a great advance in rentals, although the *Moniteur* persistently declared that the number of new houses built largely surpassed that of those which were demolished. After all, this was quite possible. But as landlords now only built palaces, divided into immense apartments, people with limited incomes did not know where to live, for they could not expend the sixth of their revenue on rent. It is true that Paris had become a sort of caravansary whither from all quarters of the globe there flocked all those who had money to spend, and those who wished to make a fortune, no matter by what means. It is certain that the theatres, ball-rooms, and restaurants were never so well filled. It is true that legions of women, with yellow hair and glaring toilettes, invaded the boulevards, driving honest housewives and mothers indoors. It is also certain that the return from the races—from those of Vincennes, for instance, with hundreds of carriages crowded with young men and women excited by champagne—furnished great amusement to the

humble denizens of the faubourgs ; and Lord Holland was unquestionably right when he wrote to the *Times* : " Paris is the city where the most amusement can be obtained." However, on the other hand, as an acute observer said : " It is all very fine—but this is the road to ruin ! "

Raymond Delorge and Léon Cornevin knew, by the way in which Roberjot talked, that the men who had been stripped and crushed by the *coup d'état*, were shaking themselves, raising their heads, and preparing for revenge. And yet, although the empire was execrated by very many people, numbers looked upon it as a lesser evil, and remarked : " The sword of Napoleon III. is preferable to the daggers of the sworn foes of public order and peace ! " This was an allusion to the perverse utterances of the socialists, and the absurd theories revealed by certain law suits—that of the Marianne society for instance, and that of the Commune Revolutionnaire.

It is true that the rising generation, of which Raymond and the young Corvenins formed part, were irritated by the prudence of their elders. When Beranger died, a hundred thousand persons followed his funeral procession, in which the representatives of the government figured, knowing that he had been the poet of the First Empire, at a time when Liberalism and Bonapartism rhymed ; knowing, too, that he had done more for the popularity of Napoleon I. with his one refrain—

" Parlez-nous de lui, grand'mère,
Grand'mère parlez-nous de lui."

than all the official panegyrists put together. Not a shout disturbed the solemn quiet of the funeral ceremony, but ten or twelve wild youths endeavoured to force the gates of the cemetery, which the police kept closed. However, they were promptly arrested. Jean Cornevin, who was attracted by the noise, as a moth is attracted by light, was among them ; and his brother, with Raymond, went to see him that night at the station-house, to which he had been consigned. But they could not obtain his release, nor could all the exertions of M. Roberjot mitigate his sentence. He spent a month in prison. A little later, Cavaignac's death took place, almost unnoticed. It was on his estate of Ourne, in the Sarthe, that this worthy citizen, who had shown as much disinterestedness and dignity as any man in France, breathed his last in comparative oblivion. However, his body was brought to Paris and interred in the Montmartre Cemetery, in the same tomb as that of his brother. No funeral orations were delivered, for the government confiscated them, as it had confiscated the addresses which were to have been spoken beside the graves of Lamennais and Marrast.

It was about this time that Raymond Delorge put in execution a long cherished project. The day he was one and-twenty he summoned the two Cornevins, and in a more solemn tone than was common to him, he said : " I am about to appeal to your friendship for a very great favour, but what I say you must regard as confidential. I have made up my mind to challenge De Combelaine, and I expect you two to be my seconds."

Léon Cornevin started. " You are mad, Raymond ! " he cried.

Raymond had expected some reply of this kind. " Mad or not, this is what I shall do," was his reply.

" And if we refuse ? "

Raymond shook his head sadly, but in a more determined tone than before, he rejoined : " I should regret it, but I should try and find some other friends not more devoted but less prudent than yourselves ! "

They knew Raymond so thoroughly that they recognized the futility of any attempt to dissuade him.

If anything, moreover, could have affected him, it would have been the significant silence of the adventurous Jean, who was generally ready for anything.

Léon did not propose to give up the point, however. "Let us admit," he said, "that we undertake the mission you desire to intrust to us, my dear Raymond, what are we to say to Monsieur de Combelaïne?"

"That he must fight with me!"

Even Jean shrugged his shoulders at this. "But on what ground?" he cried. "Why?" The colour rose to Raymond's face. "What!" he cried. "Has not this scoundrel assassinated my father?"

Léon interrupted him. "That is very true, only, as you know, he denies it. Besides, is there not a certain paper, signed and sealed, which declares De Combelaïne to be innocent, and asserts that General Delorge fell in honourable combat?"

"And what does that prove?"

"Simply that De Combelaïne will refuse your challenge."

"No—for he is brave—or rather, he has faith in his skill as a swordsman. No—for I hate him, and he must be tired of thinking of me and my vengeance. No—for he won't be sorry, having killed the father, to have a means of honestly getting rid of the son."

"And if he does refuse?"

"Then you can tell him that I will compel him to fight."

"And if he still refuses?"

"Then I will take the affair on my shoulders."

Léon Cornevin was about to reply, but Jean spoke first; he was very much provoked by Raymond's obstinacy. "And you say," he cried, "that I am a headstrong scatterbrain! You must have lost your senses to think for a moment that De Combelaïne will follow you on to the field. It is true, that once upon a time, when he had nothing to lose, he might have done so—for a mere nothing. But now he is as wealthy as he pleases. Life has a very different aspect to him, and yet you imagine he will risk his precious skin as you propose! Pshaw! he is not quite such a fool."

It was with the resigned air of a man caught in a thunder-shower that Raymond heard these words. "I came," he said, when there was a moment's pause, "not to ask advice, but a service. Will you be my seconds or not? If you say yes, we will arrange details—if not, I will go elsewhere, and in an hour I shall have what I need."

The two brothers looked at each other. If they refused, would not Raymond turn to comparative strangers, as he threatened, and was it not far better they should act as his seconds, for indifferent persons, either from stupidity or malice, might do something absurd.

"Very well," said Jean, at last, "we will act as your seconds."

Raymond's stiffened features relaxed. "Ah! thanks," he cried, "thanks. I knew I could rely on you!"

But the warmth of his thanks did not dispel the reserve of his friends. "Don't thank us," interrupted Léon, abruptly, "for it is against our convictions that we embark in this affair. Give us your instructions. We will follow them."

At all events Raymond had succeeded, and he smiled on hearing this. "My instructions are simple enough," he replied. "I wish to fight with De Combelaïne. Let him choose the weapons, hour, and place. I care for

nothing except to see him stand in front of me. You need not be troubled. Good swordsman as he may be, I am no novice, as you know, and I fancy that I shall prove a disagreeable surprise to him.

The two brothers made no further objection. As they could not avoid the affair, they cared little about the details. "Very well," they said, "we will call on your man to-morrow."

And they did so at nine o'clock in the morning.

II.

M. DE COMBELAINE resided in the Rue du Cirque, in a small, but new and most luxurious mansion, which he owed, it was said, to imperial munificence in return for certain services which are not often boasted of. There was nothing commonplace about this house, which was Verdale's architectural masterpiece. It stood at the end of a court-yard, being reached by a flight of marble steps, decorated on either side with tall faience vases. On the right and the left were the servants' quarters—the stables where eight magnificent horses ate their oats out of marble mangers—and the carriage-house full of equipages covered with green cloth.

"Upon my life!" grumbled Léon Cornevin, "the emperor lodges his friends well!"

Before the gate stood the porter, a stout man of jovial countenance, who was smoking his morning cigar, an expensive one.

"Yes, the count receives this morning," he said, in answer to the young men's inquiries. "You can go in."

They proceeded to the hall, paved with marble and resplendent with gilding, where a footman in a showy livery took their cards, and conducted them into an ante-room, where he asked them to wait. There were already three gentlemen there when our young friends entered. They were standing near a window talking, and their conversation was so interesting that they paid no attention to the new arrivals. "Well, then," asked one of the three, "do you intend to let him have the carriage?"

"How can I do otherwise?" sighed the person who was spoken to. "Am I not too far in to retreat? Do you know that he owes me fifty thousand francs?"

"The deuce he does!" interrupted the third. "Why on earth were you so mad as to let him have that amount of credit?"

"But he owes you twenty thousand!"

"That's true, but I have just come to say that he must pay me so much on account."

"He won't give you a sou."

"Then I will levy on the furniture——"

"And then——"

"Then! Why, I will obtain a judgment in my favour, and take everything—the house, the horses—and your carriages, my dear fellow!——" The others laughed; but so ominously that the speaker added: "What is there to laugh at? Perhaps you will kindly tell me?"

"Oh! certainly; my boy, you don't get up quite early enough in the morning to take in M. de Combelaïne. Don't take the trouble to do what you suggest—your stamped paper would be thrown away. Everything he has here is in some other person's name. His furniture belongs to the upholsterer—his horses are in the name of his valet——"

"But the house?"

"Is mouldy with mortgages. The emperor had barely given it to him when he raised money on it."

Jean and Léon held their breaths lest they might betray their presence, and so interrupt this instructive conversation.

"Good Heavens!" said the man who had been threatening, "are his affairs in such a state as that?"

"He is ruined—that's all!"

"And yet he made a hundred thousand francs by one single speculation a little while ago!"

"Call it a hundred and fifty thousand."

"He has two or three matters on hand to-day——"

"Excuse me; he has a dozen."

"Which will bring him as much more."

"Double as much, you may say."

"And he is ruined!"

"To that point that his servants have no wages, except what they steal. They don't suffer, however. You are a jeweller, well give a ring to his valet, and what he'll tell you will make you open your eyes, I fancy."

At any other time Jean and Léon would have shouted with laughter, so comical was the jeweller's consternation. "Is this man a gulf," he cried—"a bottomless abyss?"

"That's it, precisely."

"What does he do with all his money?"

"He spends it, of course."

"In what way? He pays for nothing."

"He gambles, my boy. Women and suppers. Pets at the races—*fêles* and journeys. Do you think that they cost nothing?"

But they checked their speech suddenly, for at this moment a valet appeared and approached Raymond's friends. "The count wishes to see you in his private room, gentlemen," he said, bowing.

M. de Combeldaine was perhaps as impoverished as his tradespeople had said; but there was no sign of it in these apartments, which displayed all the aggressive luxury typical of the Second Empire—the luxury of the *parvenu* eager to dazzle and enjoy. That was all that the two young men noticed as they passed through a preposterously decorated dining-room, and a vast reception-hall which was one mass of gilding. They were really disturbed by the thought of finding themselves face to face with their father's murderer. How their hearts beat when the servant threw open the door and announced them.

They entered the count's study, or rather smoking-room, which more than any other indicated its master's tastes and habits. There were no books, no papers lying about, but a quantity of arms of all epochs and climes—guns and swords, pieces of armour, sabres, and daggers. On the table or desk lay five or six revolvers of different systems, waiting for the count to try them and pronounce an opinion on their respective worth. Near this table M. de Combeldaine, who was attired in a gorgeous dressing-gown, sat, or rather reclined, in a huge arm-chair. He had succeeded in acquiring a new mask appropriate to the circumstances and to his new situation. And the audience who had hissed him at Brussels when he performed on the stage would never have recognized him with his hair brought down over his temples, his moustache outrageously waxed, his eyes gleaming mournfully, and every other feature impassive. He copied his master—that was all—the

master who took such pains to deaden his eyes, darken his beard, petrify his face, and prevent his lips from giving vent to aught but commonplace, expressionless words. So well, indeed, had the emperor succeeded in these efforts that the acute Italians named him Taciturn III.

When Léon and Jean Cornevin appeared, M. de Combelaïne rose, and showing them chairs, exclaimed: "Be seated, gentlemen."

But they both replied at once: "We will stand, sir, if you please."

Their idea was that the count would feign not to know their names; but in this they were mistaken. "Gentlemen," he said, "at the time of the *coup d'état* a man called Laurent Cornevin disappeared. Was he a relative of yours?"

"We are his sons," answered Léon.

"Excuse my question, gentlemen. Laurent occupied a very humble position at the Elysée?"

"He was a groom."

"While you, gentlemen——"

"We," interrupted Jean, in a hoarse voice, "we ought, I am well aware, to have starved to death, and no doubt those who suppressed the father believed that hunger would soon do as much for the children; but God decided differently. We were fortunate in finding friends who made us what we are."

It was without the slightest sign of emotion that M. de Combelaïne bowed. "I can well understand your feelings, gentlemen," he said, "when you speak of your father. His disappearance was one of those frightful accidents of which too many occur in times of civil disturbances."

"Oh! an accident—was it?" said Jean.

The Count did not seem to hear, but calmly continued speaking. "This was, of course," said he, "a most cruel blow to the unfortunate man's family. I suffered also, for this mysterious disappearance exposed me to the most odious suspicions, which not even a solemn decision of the judicial authorities failed to dispel entirely. My enemies dared to insinuate that Laurent Cornevin had been the witness of a crime."

Jean's brains reeled at the idea of such audacity as the count displayed. "We did not come here to ask for an account of our father's death," he interrupted.

M. de Combelaïne did not wink. "It would be quite natural if you did," he blandly replied, "especially after the detestable reports which have been circulated. Were you to do so, I should reply that all the influence and credit I possess have been employed in trying to find your father. Yes, all that it is humanely possible to do I have done—uselessly, alas!—as I can show you." Léon was about to speak, but De Combelaïne stopped him with a gesture, and went on. "Permit me. When I am attacked I must be allowed to defend myself. I knew the unfortunate situation of your mother. I ascertained it all from a person who is your mother's sister—your aunt, therefore—and a lady for whom I have an especial regard. I speak of Madame Flori Misri. But was it possible for me to openly aid your mother, worthy as she was? Of course not, for it would have been to give my enemies an opportunity for circulating even greater falsehoods. I told Flora to assist her sister, but Madame Cornevin rejected her help most haughtily. Was that my fault? If you doubt my good will towards your family, allow me to remind you that it was through my influence that your grandparents each obtained a lucrative position. I would also remind you

that I have secured for one of your mother's brothers a sinecure which places him above want."

Jean Cornevin could not endure another word. A succession of slaps on his cheek could not have enraged him more than this enumeration of certain relatives, all of whom he held in utter horror. "Enough!" he exclaimed in a threatening tone; "I have told you that it was not for ourselves we came here. We were sent by our intimate friend—by our brother Raymond, the son of General Delorge."

Remarkable as had been M. de Combelaïne's composure, he started now. "Ah! What does he want of me?"

"Raymond Delorge wishes to revenge his father," cried Jean; "he wishes to meet you in a duel——"

M. de Combelaïne was far too intelligent not to have looked forward to something of this kind. His features were unmoved, but his colour changed. He was evidently holding himself in check. After a moment's silence he replied: "I don't know that I blame Monsieur Raymond Delorge; I should do the same were I in his place. But I—I cannot accept the meeting he proposes."

"And yet, sir——"

"I declare that a duel between us is simply impossible," interrupted the count. "Yes, it is true I killed General Delorge, but it was in self-defence, for I loved him, and I only fought with him after I had been insulted and threatened by him; and after this horrible misfortune, after killing the father, would you have me run the risk of killing the son? No, not at any price! On the day following that deplorable duel in the Garden of the Elysée, I swore a solemn oath never to fight again, and I shall keep that oath, no matter what happens."

"That is a prudent decision when a man has a great deal to lose," muttered Léon Cornevin.

M. de Combelaïne must have also sworn that he would keep his temper, for he did not wince. "I have given you my decision, gentlemen," he said.

But Léon had something more to say. "I shall not urge you, sir," he replied, in an icy tone, "only it is my duty to warn you of the consequences of your refusal——"

"Ah!"

"Raymond is determined to obtain the satisfaction to which he considers himself entitled——"

"Sir——"

"He will stop at nothing to compel you to accede to his wishes; he will resort to violence——"

"Not a word more, sir," cried De Combelaïne, starting up. "Not a word more!" and with a convulsive gesture his hand involuntarily grasped one of the revolvers lying on the table. The Combelaïne of bygone times, the quarrelsome gambler, to whom a duel was almost an every day affair, seemed resuscitated. "You do not know the kind of man I am," he continued. "You do not know that if a human being had formerly spoken as you have just done he would not have left this room alive!"

"Do you think, then, that we ought to have left you in ignorance of our friend's intentions?" asked Léon, calmly.

De Combelaïne started forward with a terrible gesture. "Very well, then," he cried, "at the first indication of any violence from Raymond Delorge, I ——" But he stopped short, being greatly agitated.

At last, however, he mastered himself with a superhuman effort. "Nothing," he replied; "nothing!" And so saying, he laid down the revolver he held; and then, in a calmer tone, although his voice still trembled, he continued. "This affair is too grave a one for me to give a positive answer without consideration. Will Monsieur Delorge grant me twenty-four hours?"

"Most certainly."

"Then, gentlemen, give me your address. At noon—on the day after to-morrow—one of my friends will call upon you, and let you know my decision."

Feeling much disturbed, and not all pleased with themselves, the two brothers left the house, where shame was veiled with splendour. They felt they had made a great mistake in accepting this mission from Raymond, and they had only too clearly understood what De Combelaïne meant from his very first words. This man had not merely murdered General Delorge, but their own father as well, and he had instantly availed himself of their false position. Had he not at once confounded them with their mother's family, with that family, alas! the sons of which grew up for the prison of Mazas, and the daughters for Saint Lazare! Had he not taunted them with what he had done for their grandparents? Had he not boasted that their aunt, their mother's sister, Flora Misri, was his mistress? What a disgrace. And yet they had been compelled to bear all these insults spoken in a tone of quiet impudence. "The scoundrel!" cried Jean, as they passed through the gate. "I should have preferred his firing on us with the revolver he had in his hand."

Léon shook his head. "We are children," he said, "and we have been guilty of the most abject piece of folly. When a man attacks a wild beast he ought to be armed well enough to kill it. We attacked Combelaïne, and we are unarmed. This man had forgotten us—but we have recalled our existence to him, and reminded him that we may become dangerous. He won't fight—but our imprudence will cost us dear."

The two brothers well knew that Raymond was expecting them with keen anxiety, but circumstances were now so critical, and they felt themselves charged with so heavy a responsibility, that they determined to consult M. Roberjot before seeing their friend, and this in spite of the promise of secrecy which he had exacted from them. The lawyer was just taking his seat at table when they were ushered in. "Ah!" he cried, "is Master Jean in trouble again?"

Léon was greatly embarrassed, but still he accurately related the whole affair—Raymond's entreaties—their spell of waiting in the ante-room—the talk of the tradespeople—De Combelaïne's reception, his refusal and anger, and final request for twenty-four hours' delay. M. Roberjot waited till the young fellow had finished, and then angrily exclaimed, "The devil take you!" Léon, who was utterly aghast, attempted to speak; but the lawyer would not listen. "That your brother Jean should be guilty of such folly," he cried "does not surprise me; but you, Léon—a sensible fellow, a sage, a philosopher——"

"But, sir," expostulated Léon, "if we had not yielded to Raymond he would have appealed to the first person he saw——"

"But why on earth did you not tell me, gentlemen? I would have shown Raymond the folly of his conduct, and if he had persisted I should have collared him and said: 'Look here, young man, before fighting with any other person you must first fight with me.'" Roberjot was so angry

that he forgot to eat, and with his knife in one hand and his fork in the other, he gesticulated as if he had been addressing the Chamber of Deputies. "So your idea," he continued "is that, when you have a mortal enemy, and see him on the verge of an abyss, you ought to call out to him to take care?"

When Jean Cornevin, who was a rash, headstrong fellow, was guilty of an act of folly, he owned it with the best grace in the world, but Léon, cold and grave by nature, was destitute of this ingratiating quality. He did not like to seem in the wrong, and if, however, he was shown his mistake, he was all the more disposed to persist in it. "I don't see," he answered, in rather a piqued tone, "how our step can change Monsieur de Combelaïne's situation."

Roberjot shrugged his shoulders. "Since you don't see it," said he, "I will explain. For the last ten years De Combelaïne has improved the advantages he derived from the *coup d'état*. For ten years he has been receiving vast sums. He sells his influence, and that of his friends. He makes money at the Bourse out of the secrets that are confided to him, or that he surprises; and he draws at sight on the imperial purse. However, where is he to-day? Of all the millions he has handled, nothing remains but the regret that he has not had more, and a mad longing to recover them. His situation is just what it was on the eve of the 2nd of December. No, I am mistaken—it is worse; for he is ten years older; he has less courage and far more extravagant habits. His creditors harassed him then for hundreds of francs, but to-day they worry him for millions."

"Yes, but he has resources," murmured Léon.

"He had them, it is true; but he has them no longer. No, not one, they are all exhausted. He has no influence to-day, for he has abused and used it for himself, his mistresses, and the first scamps who came to him with well-lined pockets. Not one of his friends would lend him a hundred louis, and his signature is not worth a hundred sous. Do you know how the emperor would reply to his cries of distress? By ten thousand francs a year in quarterly payments! How would he live in that case, he who has never yet been able to make both ends meet. He realizes this fully well, and so he is talking of marrying."

"Of marrying?"

"And why not? You wouldn't give him your daughter if you had one—nor would I; but other people don't think as we do."

"But this man——"

"This man, my dear boy, will give his wife the title of countess, which will stand for a time, and he will open the doors of the Tuileries for her. This man, if his father-in-law is not absolutely notorious, will have him decorated—perhaps elected deputy, or possibly senator."

Jean smiled. "This lawyer believes in parliamentary functions, at all events," he thought.

But Léon did not smile. "Well, then why doesn't M. de Combelaïne marry," he asked, "if his wife's dowry would set him afloat again?"

"That is precisely what I could not find out for some time," answered Roberjot; "but I know now. He dares not——"

"Oh!"

"He dares not, because there is a certain person who has designs on him, and this person knows so many of his secrets that he dares not make an enemy of her. He cannot marry her, nor will she allow him to marry any one else."

"And who is this person?"

"Oh! you know her," answered the advocate, and, after a little hesitation, he added:—"It is Madame Flora Misri—the woman who, while De Combelaïne was throwing money out of the window, picked it up and invested it. She is a shrewd, managing woman, notwithstanding all her affected airs. She is a good accountant, and has managed affairs so well that now when the count is ruined to that degree that he hardly knows where to find twenty-five louis, Flora is wealthy, with fully a million and a half in the hands of her notary."

It was with manifest impatience—the impatience of a man whose wound is touched—that Léon listened. "In that case," he said, "I don't see what possible influence our step can have on De Combelaïne's determination."

The lawyer smiled. "Obstinate, as usual," he rejoined, and then he added, quickly: "But let us go on. Monsieur de Combelaïne is at the end of his tether. A good dowry would save him; but, as I said, he does not wish to marry Flora Misri, and she does not wish him to marry any one else. Of course he meant to do something to get himself out of the mess, and what was it? At all events he is so pressed, he cannot wait, and I believe he would have embarked on some perilous enterprise which would have settled his fate. However, you select just the very moment to call out to him, 'Look out, your enemies are watching you!' Don't you see that he will be prudent now. 'Forewarned means forearmed.'"

Léon was obstinate, but not to the extent of denying tangible evidence. "Excuse me, sir," said he, "I had not looked so far. We have been even madder than I supposed. But now what are we to do? For this is the question I came to ask."

Having finished his breakfast, Roberjot rose from table. "If I were free," he said, "I would go with you, but I have business to attend to; still, I will be with you to-morrow to receive the message from Monsieur de Combelaïne. Try to make Raymond hear reason in the meantime."

This was more easily advised than executed, for, on learning what M. de Combelaïne had said, and that his friends had consulted M. Roberjot, Raymond fell into a violent rage, declaring that it was a terrible thing not to have a friend in whom he could confide. The next day, however, when the lawyer appeared, the young fellow seemed calm, either because reflection had sobered him, or because he was more impressed by Roberjot than he wished to let it appear.

"I am punctual, I hope!" said the lawyer, gaily. "Has any one come?"

"Not yet," answered Léon. And without allowing the advocate time for a rejoinder, the young fellow drew him to an open window, and quickly whispered: "I am troubled about Raymond. I know him. He is quiet, as you see, but it is only because he is meditating some folly in case De Combelaïne persists in his refusal."

"And he will persist," answered Roberjot, "I am certain of that. But re-assure yourselves, my measures are taken. There comes our ambassador I believe."

A brougham drawn by two magnificent horses was just drawing up in front of the house. A stout man alighted, and went in; and a minute later was ushered into the presence of the friends. He was a heavily whiskered man of forty-five, altogether too well dressed, with tight-fitting pearl-gray gloves, which seemed on the point of bursting. "I am the friend of the Count de Combelaïne, gentlemen," he said, as he crossed the threshold, and I come—I come——" But the rest of his words died away on his

lips, and a sudden pallor overspread his countenance. He had seen M. Roberjot near the window. "You here?" he stammered—"you."

"Myself, dear M. Verdale," replied the lawyer, with the most ironical politeness. "I am the friend, the intimate friend, you understand, of M. Raymond Delorge, and I have come to know what Count de Combelaïne's friends have advised him to do."

Raymond, Jean, and Léon were utterly amazed. What connection was there between these two men? Some secret plainly, for the one seemed the submissive slave of the other. Verdale's gay, patronizing air had left him, and his attitude had become most humble. "We have decided," he said, with some little hesitation, "that the count ought not to accept the challenge of M. Raymond Delorge, who, we trust, will understand why this duel is an impossibility. If he should see fit to put certain threats he has made into execution, my friend the count, will have him bound over to keep the peace."

"Very well," rejoined the lawyer, coldly, "we will talk the matter over."

But hardly had Verdale retired, or, rather, fled from the spot, than Raymond's anger burst forth. "He will have me bound over to keep the peace, will he? Well, we'll see. This very evening, at the opera, I'll give him an opportunity."

Léon and Jean thought that the lawyer would give an angry answer, but not at all; he simply walked towards the door, calmly opened it, and there on the threshold, now, stood Madame Delorge.

"My mother!" stammered Raymond, considerably disconcerted.

"Yes, your mother!" said she, advancing to meet him. "Fortunately, a friend has warned her of your folly. Poor foolish boy? Don't you realize that to call M. de Combelaïne out is to acknowledge his innocence. Do men fight with cowardly assassins? To let him cross his sword with yours would be to relinquish all claim on justice. And justice must be done to us, Raymond. Your father must be avenged!"

III.

IN warning Madame Delorge, Roberjot had proved that he well understood Raymond's character. He knew that he himself would have vainly expended time and eloquence in trying to turn Raymond from a design so long cherished, a design which he had come to regard not only as excellent, but practicable. However, his mother's entreaties won from him a solemn promise to relinquish it. "You have done me a sorry favour," he said, a few days later, to Roberjot. "Before interfering, you ought to have learned something of my life. Do you know that since my father's death, never a day has passed without my mother showing me the sword, sealed in its scabbard, which hangs above my father's portrait. 'Remember, my son,' she says, 'that yours is the task and the right to avenge your father.' Do you know that now, after ten years, my father's place is daily laid at our table, and that I never take my seat without my mother's eyes turning to the empty chair, without her saying in a cold, measured tone, 'This chair will always be placed here, Raymond, until justice has been done to us!' Do you know that even my sister—even our old servant Krauss—keeps saying to me, that it is for me to punish the assassin?" Hot tears of rage stood in the unhappy young man's eyes, and it was in a stifled voice that he continued: "With this constant reference to the subject, how could my

imagination remain unexcited? Is it living to be haunted by the spectre of my assassinated father? I had found the means, as I thought, the only means—a duel—and you have prevented it. But in the name of Heaven, tell me what I am to do—for do something I must—and at once? Give me some advice? Ah! I see that you are going to say to me, as my mother said: 'Let us wait!' Wait! And for what—a miracle? Ah! I lack faith in that advice. There are no more miracles, and we shall wait until De Combelaïne dies in his bed."

Raymond's despair was increased by the thought that Combelaïne and his friends would regard him as a boyish boaster—who talked more than he acted. "How these people will laugh at us!" he said to Léon Cornevin. But De Combelaïne did not laugh, as was proved by subsequent events.

On leaving the Polytechnic School, Raymond Delorge had entered *l'Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées*, and was a State engineer by profession. As to Léon, he loathed any employment under government, and therefore connected himself with a railway company, and as his abilities were of a high order and his knowledge very considerable, he was allowed at first to hope for, and finally promised, a situation corresponding with his deserts, and the services he had already rendered to the company. He believed himself, on the eve of obtaining this situation, when one morning the manager sent for him, and in the most embarrassed way, announced that it had been decided, in opposition to his own advice and wishes, to give the position to another candidate. The manager added that he was the more worried as the rival candidate was not clever, and——

"It is unfortunate," interrupted Léon coldly; "but there is no need of any apology."

However, notwithstanding his philosophy, Léon was in reality thunder-struck. The company's decision was all the more extraordinary as the man they had taken was not a graduate of the Polytechnic School—for which establishment railway directors usually have a great weakness. "It is perfectly incomprehensible," he said to his mother, who was more afflicted than himself by his disappointment. However, it was not long before he obtained a key to the mystery. Difficulties were incessantly thrown in his way by the people in whose employment he was, until at last it became clear that they were determined to get rid of him—or, rather, determined to annoy and worry him into forwarding his resignation. But why—why?

"My dear Cornevin," said the chief engineer one day, "you have some enemies among the directors."

"Impossible!" cried Léon.

"But it is so—and if it had not been for our manager, who has bravely stood up for you, you would long since have been grossly insulted!"

On hearing this a ray of light flashed on Léon's mind. However, before aught else, he determined to see M. Roberjot.

"Believe me," said the lawyer, "you must not show fight—your enemy is M. de Maumussy."

"I thought you told me that he and De Combelaïne were at daggers drawn?"

"Yes, so they were; but Raymond's imprudent step united them again against the common enemy. Now, as your company solicits a grant, and has need of Maumussy, you must not hesitate a moment, but send in your resignation at once."

Raymond was fairly enraged when he heard of this. "Ah! Why did you not allow me to kill that venomous reptile De Combelaïne?" he cried.

Three months had not elapsed since Léon's resignation, when Paris, and in fact all Europe, were startled by an attempt to murder the emperor. An Italian, Felice Orsini, accompanied by two accomplices, repaired in front of the Opera House in the Rue Lepelletier, and tried to kill Napoleon III. by throwing several explosive bombs under his carriage. The emperor escaped, but forty-seven persons were killed or wounded. Strangely enough, the police had taken no steps to prevent this attempt. We say strangely enough, inasmuch as they had been warned that a large number of exceedingly dangerous bombs had been manufactured in London. They had been warned of Orsini's departure for France, with his accomplices, and yet these men were not arrested, but were allowed to remain quietly in Paris for nearly a month. "What on earth were the police thinking of?" remarked the Parisians, when these particulars came to their knowledge; and their astonishment was not unreasonable. Canler, in his memoirs, published the following year, and at once suppressed, formally accused the police of incapacity, negligence, and something even worse. The result was that the prefect of police sent in his resignation. "The least he can do!" muttered the Parisians, who were considerably alarmed for their personal safety. However, their uneasiness took another form when they saw General Espinasse, one of the prime movers of the *coup d'état*, and whose reputation for hardness and brutality was proverbial, called to the head of affairs. "This minister of the interior, with a sabre at his side, is certainly no improvement," said one of the newspapers, for which saying it was promptly suppressed. However, the paper was right, and a few days later a law was passed which armed the government with discretionary powers. Certain people, more imperialist even than the emperor, hastened to express their gratification at this display of greater firmness on the part of the government, which they attested had been far too lenient. One of them even said in a cynical way: "Orsini has done some good; he has shown us a means of getting rid of troublesome people."

That was quite true, for the police made arrests on all sides, without discernment or investigation. It was imagined that their zeal would abate when it had been clearly established that the Orsini affair was not a national conspiracy, but the work of foreigners alone. However, such was not the case. Far from diminishing after Orsini's trial and execution, the number of arrests increased throughout France. There was simply a little more method—that was all. And once more, as in 1852, vessels loaded with suspected persons set sail for Cayenne and Lambessa. Like all liberal-minded people, Raymond Delorge and Léon Cornevin were painfully impressed by so much useless violence, and wondered how it would all end. One morning, they had just risen, when the valet of their friend M. Roberjot was ushered in. He brought a hurried note from his master, and having failed to find a cab, he had run with it all the way to the Rue Pigalle. This is what M. Roberjot wrote to Léon: "Send your brother Jean to Belgium or England on a tour. Let him start to-day rather than to-morrow, this morning rather than this evening."

"Jean is in danger!" cried Raymond, "and yet he seems to have given up dabbling in politics." But Léon shook his head. He did not speak, for he did not wish to hurt Raymond's feelings by remarking that it was no doubt M. de Comberlaine who had devised this means of getting rid of one of them. "Let us hasten and warn Jean!" added Raymond, and at once they started off.

Jean had his studio in a new building on the Boulevard de Clichy. The

concierge, who was also Jean's housekeeper, was standing at her door when the two young men reached it. "Ah! gentlemen!" she cried, "what a terrible business!" Léon's and Raymond's hearts sank within them. Had they arrived too late? "Poor Master Jean has just been arrested," continued the woman, drying her eyes with the corner of her apron. "They have just taken him away in a cab."

Raymond was as white as a sheet, and fairly staggered under the blow. However, Léon shook off his own apprehensions in his wish to comfort his friend. "Let us know all that has happened," he quietly asked.

Several shopkeepers in the neighbourhood who had witnessed the arrest, now crowded forward to listen. "Come into my room," said the woman; "we can be overheard here." And as the young men followed her, she closed the door. "This is how it was," she began; "at day-break five individuals arrived and asked for Jean Cornevin, the artist. I was going to take him his coffee that very moment. These men looked so odd that I had a great mind to say my young gentleman was in the country, when one of them threw open his coat and showed me his tricolour scarf, saying to me: 'No nonsense, now! On what floor is this fellow Cornevin's studio?' My heart leapt to my mouth, and I almost let my coffee fall on the floor. 'He lives on the fifth floor, the door on the right,' I answered. 'Good,' said the one with the scarf, who was a commissary of police, and he walked up the stairs with his men. But he did not tell me to stay behind, so I went too. Ah! if I could only have warned Master Jean! He was as unsuspecting as possible, and was painting in his studio, with his back to the door, which was open on account of the stove smoking. He was so busy that he did not even turn round on hearing the footsteps, but merely asked: 'Who's there?' 'In the name of the law I arrest you,' was the answer. 'Arrest me!' cried Master Jean, and never did I see a man so astonished. 'Why do you arrest me?' 'You will find that out soon enough,' was the answer. 'You have only to follow me now.' You know, gentlemen, how quick Master Jean is. When he heard this rough answer he turned as red as a lobster, and I thought he was going to throw his palette at the man's head. But he reflected in time, and began to dress, while the police looked into every corner and drawer. When he saw this he said with a laugh: 'If you find anything there, please show it to me, won't you?' When he was ready he asked permission to write a note to his mother, but was refused, and then they led him away. There was a vehicle outside; he got in with two of the men, and one of them on the box, and then off they went."

When the woman's story was over the two young men breathed freely, for they remembered that at the time of Jean's first arrest, he had been compromised by the papers and drawings found in his rooms. This time, however, it was clear that nothing had been discovered. "The most important point now," said Léon, "is to discover where my poor brother has been taken."

The woman began to weep. "I did my best, gentlemen," she sobbed—"I was all ears—but I couldn't catch a word. The coachman must have received his orders in advance, for he drove off without a word being said to him."

"But was nothing said to you?" asked Léon.

"No, sir, nothing, except that just as the commissary of police went out he handed me the key, and said I was responsible to master Jean's family for the safety of all the property he left in the rooms."

Léon shuddered. This precaution suggested that Jean might not soon return home.

"Oh ! Jean," murmured Raymond, "dear unfortunate friend."

But Léon was cold and calm again. "Give me that key," he said, to the *conciergerie*, "we will go up stairs."

At the first glance the truth of the woman's story became apparent. It was evident that Jean had been at work when the police entered, for the paint was not dry on the canvas. His brushes lay on the floor with his palette freshly set that morning, and his tubes were scattered in every direction, many of them having been crushed under the feet of the rough visitors. By the way in which the young artist's working blouse was tossed on the chair, it was easy to divine how hastily he had dressed. In short, on all sides there were traces of the efforts made by the police to discover compromising papers.

"We have not a moment to lose," said Léon ; "we must find out this very day where my brother is."

They thereupon hurried to inform Madame Delorge, who, on hearing the sad news, exclaimed : "I recognize the hand of Combelaïne in this ;" and, less generous than Léon had been, she added to her son, "And this is the result of your senseless provocation."

More exasperated even than all the others, Ducoudray on his side exclaimed : "Why does not De Combelaïne have us all arrested ?"

It was decided that it would be best to keep Madame Cornevin in ignorance of her son's arrest for a few days, for were he to be liberated at once she would be saved an immense amount of anxiety. However, this kind consideration was useless, for Jean's *conciergerie* had been to see Madame Cornevin, and had told her everything ; and while the friends sat deliberating as to the steps they should take the poor mother came in looking as pale as death but with flashing eyes. "Is this true?" she cried. No one dared answer. "It is true, then—the wretches have taken my son now, as they did my husband! As I came here I was nearly run over by a carriage in which I recognized M. de Combelaïne and Flora Misri, smiling and happy. Oh, my God, it is hard to doubt Thy justice!" And, crushed by grief she sank on to a sofa and burst into tears.

At that moment M. Roberjot's valet arrived with another letter from his master. "At the same time, as I sent a warning to you this morning I sent another to Jean. Alas! I was myself warned too late, for when my messenger reached the spot Jean had already been arrested. Find out if you can where he was taken. I shall try to ascertain this on my side also."

But in vain for four days did Jean's friends besiege the doors of every jail in Paris. The only intelligence they could obtain came to Léon from an official of the Prefecture of Police, a man who was colder than the iron chain of a well and more discreet than a prison door. "Your brother is in excellent health," he said ; "this is all I can tell you to-day. Come back in a fortnight."

"That is precisely what they said to me," sighed the poor mother, "when I went there to ask for my husband. I shall never see my son again!"

However, on the fifth day after Jean's arrest one of his artist friends came with a letter he had received, and which Jean had addressed to him, fearing that a direction in the name of Cornevin would cause it to be suppressed. This is what he wrote : "I have done my best to obtain permission to write to you, and I am refused. However, a convict with whom I have been talking says that for ten francs he will get a letter posted. I would gladly give a thousand to be certain that he is speaking the truth. I have been at Marseilles since yesterday, and I have never been in better health. Having suspected when they arrested me that I was to take some charming

trip, I provided myself with linen and money—for fortunately I had some money in my rooms. I have reason to believe that this very evening I shall be sent to Guyana. Ah ! dearest mother, if I were sure that you were not weeping your precious eyes out I should be delighted with this voyage. Just think of the superb studies I can make for future pictures. Don't be distressed, dear mother ; all will come right again. I kiss you again and again."

This tender letter, which was so like Jean in its careless gaiety, calmed Madame Cornevin's grief for the time being, but did not dispel her fears. She pictured her beloved son, living among criminals and condemned to the companionship of convicts. She saw him hurried on board of a ship between a double file of soldiers. She followed him in her thoughts until her tears burst forth. "I shall never see him again!" she cried. However, on the receipt of this letter Raymond and Léon set out for Marseilles, wishing to be near their brother and friend—hoping to see him, and let him know that he was not deserted and forgotten. But they were too late. The vessel in which Jean had embarked had gone two hours. So they were told, indeed, by a young woman whom they met at the docks. She carried a child in her arms, and was sadly watching the horizon. Far off a light cloud trailed across the sky. She pointed to it and said : "That is the smoke, the smoke of the ship." Alas ! it bore away her husband, the father of her child. "What will become of me ?" she sobbed. "What will become of me and my little one ?"

Alas ! How many similar complaints rose towards the God of Justice from all parts of France in those grim days of fiendish despotism.

The newspapers were silent. Had they spoken their existence would have been compromised. General Espinasse ruled with a heavy hand, and yet the empire was in reality no stronger than before. The government began to realize that something must be done to arouse the nation from the apathy into which it had fallen ; and this something could only be war. The emperor hesitated between two pretexts which offered equal advantages—the redemption of Poland or the freedom of Italy. Italy, served by Cavour, won the day. On the 3rd of May, 1859, the emperor announced to the French nation that he was about to draw the sword in favour of the independence of the Italian people, and that he should not sheath it again until he had freed Italy to the shores of the Adriatic. Since the 1st of January, a war with Austria had been anticipated, and the excitement was very great. This war, impolitic as it was, was welcomed with enthusiasm by all classes. The regiments marched through Paris with colours flying and drums beating, and when, on the 10th of May, the emperor left the Tuileries to drive to the Lyons station, he was welcomed with such acclamations as had never before met his ears, and as he was never to hear again. This day was indeed his one solitary day of popularity throughout his reign.

But Italy was not freed to the Adriatic. After the victory of Magenta—which gave General MacMahon a marshal's baton and the title of duke, and when General Espinasse was killed—after the glorious and bloody fight of Solferino, it was suddenly discovered that the Emperors of France and of Austria, Napoleon III. and Francis Joseph, had met at Villa Franca, and had agreed on the terms of a peace which was signed. Were the promises of the imperial proclamation declaring that Italy should be freed fulfilled ? By no means. And this was why the peace enraged the Italians. Why had the emperor abandoned his plans ? Some said from fear of revolution—others, that he had yielded to the representations of the great powers, who dreaded

a universal war. At all events, both in Italy and France, the deception was cruel, and the irritation great. The return of the army was very unlike its departure. "What good has this war done us?" people asked, and they commented sharply on the blunders of the campaign, which short as it had been, had fully revealed the weakness of French military organization. The troops, it was asserted, had not been concentrated with fitting rapidity. The arrangements had been faulty in every respect. Sometimes the soldiers were literally without bread to eat; and more than once they had lacked ammunition. The generals, moreover, had not acted in unison, and patriotism had not driven rivalry from their hearts. When peace was signed Marshal Neil and Marshal Canrobert quarrelled so violently that the emperor was forced to interfere, or a duel would certainly have taken place.

However, with his extraordinary pretensions to be the arbiter of Europe, the restorer of the liberties of nations, Napoleon III. could not possibly perpetuate in France the system of repression which had followed the Orsini affair. So, on the 15th of August, 1859, there appeared in the *Moniteur*, a decree which said: "Amnesty full and entire is granted to all persons arrested in virtue of the law on Public Safety."

"Good Heavens!" cried Madame Cornevin, when Raymond told her the news; "I am going to see my boy again."

Jean was living. His health had not suffered, and during his year's absence he had contrived to write to them pretty often. After an interminable voyage he had been landed at the Devil's Island, the smallest of the Salvation Isles, and also the dreariest, as all the trees had been cut down to furnish materials for boats, and to lessen the chances of escape. "For the first time," wrote Jean to his brother, "I feel utterly discouraged when I look at the low sandy beach, swept incessantly by all the winds that blow, where there is not a tree, merely a few scanty shrubs to be seen, and where there are no other signs of civilization but such as are furnished by the various buildings, half forts and half prisons." Fortunately, however, Jean was not of a nature to be easily crushed. "It would please the persons who sent me here too much," he wrote, "and as I have no other way of annoying them, I intend to play them the very bad trick of retaining both my health and my spirits."

He kept his word, and bore up without a murmur under the rough discipline of jailors, and the constant society of criminals. He took pains to say, also, that the unhealthiness of the climate had been greatly exaggerated. "I feel my pulse every morning," he wrote, "I look at my tongue in my shaving-glass. I watch every symptom in my stomach, but all in vain: I cannot discover the smallest ailment. It took me some little time to become accustomed to the food, but I have succeeded. The governor of the island, who is a lieutenant of marines, met me yesterday, examined me from head to foot, and said, in a tone of profound surprise, 'Upon my life! I think you have grown fat.' 'Is that forbidden?' I asked; 'and if it is not, I propose to return to you stouter than when I went away.'"

"What a fellow he is!" cried M. Ducoudray, quite touched by this unconquerable cheerfulness. "I do believe that he could jest on the scaffold."

Jean's situation on the Devil's Island at last improved. For on orders received from Cayenne he was exempted from hard labour, and given a room to himself. He was a prisoner still, but the entire island was his prison—it belonged to him. He had got rid of the odious dormitory; he had a retreat to himself, where he could sit and think and build hopes for

the future. He was at last able to satisfy the aspirations for work which had tormented him for months. And as a proof of this, he wrote to his mother describing the house he lived in, and sent a sketch of it. "You see," he said, "that it is no palace. My floor is beaten earth, my roof is the cover of a huge box; but I have an iron bedstead, a chair, and an unheard-of luxury, a mosquito net, which is the envy of all beholders."

His cheerfulness could not last, however; lassitude and homesickness were taking possession of him, when an unexpected happiness probably saved his life. He had just risen one morning, when the governor of the island came in and told him that, according to orders just received, he was to be sent to Cayenne. Jean knew that this was considered very desirable, and had seen many of his companions leave with joy, but they had had some protecting influence to push them, or else possessed the art of persuasion, while he, on the contrary, knew no one, and was not of a nature to bow down and ask for favours. It was therefore with some distrust that he at first received the news. "Will that be any better?" he asked.

"Be any better," repeated the governor. "Do you not think it will be better to leave the companionship of criminals and enjoy a semi-liberty in the midst of the semi-civilization of a French colony? What a question to ask!"

"But changes don't always bring happiness," murmured Jean.

He was not long, however, in changing his opinion. The sutler at the Devil's Island had been in the habit, for some time past, of selling Jean's drawings at Cayenne. One of them had chanced to fall into the hands of the leading merchant in the colony, who, struck by the talent they displayed, had interested himself in the artist's fate. It was this worthy man who received Jean at the dock on his arrival at Cayenne, "You will come straight to my house," he said; and Jean welcomed so cordially, and treated with such unexpected hospitality, soon recovered his spirits and self-reliance. He had made many plans for the future, when, on September 28th, 1859, the proclamation of amnesty reached Cayenne.

"France! Am I then to see France again?" cried Jean, half mad with joy. And two months later to a day, he held his mother in his arms.

"All our sorrows are forgotten," she murmured, "now that I have you here once more!"

But this was not Jean's opinion. The very night of his return he took his brother and Raymond aside, "Listen, my friends," he said: "I have brought a great joy with me, I believe, from Cayenne. I have brought almost the certainty that our father is not dead!"

IV.

JEAN expected a shout of joy, but his words were received in silence. Léon and Raymond looked at him as if they thought him quite mad. "Do you know what you are saying, my dear brother?" asked Léon, gently.

"Perfectly."

"Then why have you waited until now to tell us this? Why have you not written it?"

"Because certain secrets can't be confided to a letter when one is a prisoner. All letters must be delivered open to one's jailer." And without waiting for the questions which he read in his companion's eyes, he continued, speaking rapidly, "First, I must tell how I learned what I know.

I was settled comfortably with the merchant of whom I wrote, and wanted to buy an easel. I could not find one, and then asked for a workman who could make one.

"I was sent to a man named Nantel who had been transported after the *coup d'état*, and had been long since pardoned; but instead of returning to France, he had married a young girl of the colony, and was making quite a little fortune by his ingenuity in preparing hard-wood roofing, for in Guyana wood takes the place of slates. I found him to be a man about forty, with an intelligent face, and he instantly understood what I wanted. He promised to execute the commission at once, and I gave him my name and address, so that he might bring the easel to me when finished. But instead of writing down the address in a little book he had taken from a drawer for the purpose, this worthy fellow stood looking at me with the strangest expression, 'What on earth is the matter?' I exclaimed.

"'Nothing,' he said, 'only that the name of Cornevin brings back all sorts of recollections to me.' 'Have you ever known anyone of the name?' I asked. 'Yes; a poor fellow exiled like myself in 1851.' At this reply, I felt hope leap in my heart, and I cried out: 'What was the Christian name of the man you speak of?' 'It was Laurent,' answered Nantel.

"'This was conclusive. Chance? no; Providence had led me to this man who had known my father, who had seen him since the fatal day when he was torn away from us, and who could probably tell me something which would enable me to trace him. 'I am the son of Laurent Cornevin,' I said. 'For the last ten years we have moved heaven and earth to find him, and we were finally forced to the conclusion that he was killed during the fatal month of December——' 'No, that is not so,' said Nantel, 'for I was with him at Brest, and then we were together again on the Devil's Island.' I was filled with rage at the thought that my father had been imprisoned in the same spot where I had suffered so much; and at the idea, too, that his feet had trod those rocks where I had sat and dreamed of France for so many dreary hours. But where was he now? 'Is he dead?' I asked in a trembling voice; 'did he, with all his anxieties telling on him, succumb to the influence of the climate?' 'No,' answered Nantel, 'he tried to escape, and I have always fancied he succeeded; in fact, I subsequently saw one of his companions, who told me he got safely off.'"

Jean's excitement was affecting his listeners. For the first time for ten years a ray of light, feeble enough to be sure, but a certain one, was cast on the darkness and mystery of their past.

But Jean continued: "As you may imagine, I overwhelmed Nantel with questions, whereupon he asked me to follow him into his back shop, and said he must think the whole matter over and would tell me everything he knew. I made him put his story into writing, and he did so and signed it. And in fact here it is. So saying Jean drew from his pocket a roll of coarse paper, covered with writing in an uncultivated hand, and began to read it.

"At the request of Jean Cornevin, artist, exiled to Guyana, I, Antoine Nantel, carpenter, living at Cayenne, write all I know of the history of Laurent Cornevin, swearing at the same time to tell the truth and nothing but the truth. On the 3rd of December, 1851, I was in the Rue du Petit-Carreau, where there was a barricade, and where some fighting had been going on. I was arrested and taken to the nearest station-house. The next day I was sent to Brest. Anxiety and fatigue made me ill, and, on my arrival at Brest, the physician ordered me to the hospital. I had been there a week, when one night I was woke up by a loud noise. A man who was

insensible and covered with blood was being brought in and placed on the bed next to mine. The nurses crowded around him, and I heard one of them say, "If he revives at all I will send for the priest." But he lay unconscious all night; still when the surgeon-in-chief came and looked at him in the morning, he said he could save him. I found out later who the poor fellow was; he had been arrested the same day as myself, but, on reaching Brest, had managed to evade the vigilance of his guardians and get out on the roof of the prison. To do this required marvellous agility and strength. Unfortunately his foot slipped, and he fell from an enormous height on to the road below. His leg was broken, and he was frightfully injured about the head. All the same, however, he soon got better. But in vain did I try to enter into conversation with him; he would only answer me with a yes or a no—if he condescended to answer at all. All day long he would lie in his bed, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, and his hands clenched. But at night it was a different thing. Then I heard him sob more than once, and mutter: 'My poor wife! my poor children!' This was all so dreadful to me that I asked the matron to change my bed. Of course I was laughed at, but my neighbour was told that he must keep quiet, as he troubled the patients near him. Thereupon the poor fellow looked at me with the saddest eyes in the world, and said, 'I am sorry to have disturbed you.' I had only three louis in the world, but I would gladly have given them to him if I hadn't asked to have my bed changed, and I said to myself, 'What a hard creature I am! Here I am without a human being to regret. No one cares where I am or how I am. And here is this poor fellow with his wife and children left behind him!' I naturally begged my neighbour's pardon—he was No. 23 and I 22—and told him he might sigh and groan as much as he pleased. But after that I never heard a sound, and this was really worse than before.

"One afternoon one of the police inspectors came into the ward. He saw No. 23 warming himself near the stove, so he went up to him and tapped him on his shoulder: 'Ah! my poor Boutin,' he said gaily, 'have you got over your gymnastics?' No. 23 did not reply. 'Are you deaf?' asked the inspector. The man did not speak, and this made the inspector get furious. 'Do you intend to answer me?' he said. 'Yes, when you call me by my right name.' The inspector shrugged his shoulders. 'The same old notion!' he said contemptuously. 'My name is not Boutin,' was the reply.

"'Ah!' said the inspector, 'I think you ought to be tired of that song. Listen to me, take my advice, and give up denying your identity. What on earth is the use of such obstinacy? You are known; you were arrested under the name of Boutin; you were sent here as Boutin, and that is the name inscribed at Brest. Boutin you are, and Boutin you will remain as long as you live.' 'Just as you say,' replied 23. But as soon as the inspector had gone, he turned towards me, and said in a low voice: 'Did you hear?'

"I was vexed, for it was clear that he distrusted me. I spoke to him no more after that, and I found it pretty hard, for we were the only two Parisians, the only two political prisoners—I may say, too, the only two honest men in that great hospital ward. The others were all convicts, and my tongue should have withered in my mouth rather than have addressed them. Time passed on. No. 23 and I were still in the hospital, but one fine morning in February the surgeon, without saying a word to us, signed our papers of dismissal, and the superintendent came in and shouted out: "Nos. 22 and 23 will leave to-day, and sleep to-night on board the transport vessel—the 'Rhône.' Pack your trunks!"

"This was a little joke, for I had been arrested in my shirt sleeves. But 23 started up pale and trembling—'Will you do me a service?' he hastily said. I naturally answered yes, whereupon he rejoined, 'Before we leave here we shall be searched, I presume——' 'I suppose so,' I replied. 'But not in the same way,' said he. 'Your search will be a mere matter of form, but I shall be examined most carefully.' 'Why this difference?' I asked. 'Because,' he answered, 'I am suspected of having about me a thing which I really possess, and which I have hitherto been fortunate enough to keep out of their clutches. Will you take care of it? Will you swear to use all your ingenuity to conceal it, and give it back to me on board the vessel?' I gave him the promise he asked, whereupon he ripped open the waist-band of his pantaloons, and drew out a letter folded into the smallest possible compass. He gave it to me, and, according to his advice, I hid it in the woollen cap I wore. As it belonged to the Administration it would not be taken from me.

"The precaution was a wise one, and No. 23's provisions were fully realized. I was nominally searched; that is, I was made to undress in one room, and go into another, where I was given some clothes belonging to the government. No. 23 was now no longer the man I had seen him—indifferent to all that was going on. His faculties were all awake. Instead of quietly obeying, he fought, so to speak, over every shred. He said his clothes were his own; that no one had any right to take them; and that he would be cut to pieces rather than give them up. In a word, he acted to perfection the part of a man who thinks he is about to lose something most precious. I was almost deceived myself, although I had the letter inside the lining of my cap. Of course he was obliged to yield. He was carried into the next room and dressed in his new clothing by force. I noticed that a man, who had much the look of having just come from the Prefecture of Police in Paris, inspected all these proceedings. That same evening we went on board the transport ship, and I gave 23 his letter. He snatched hold of it with joy, and pressed it to his breast. Then he exclaimed, 'We shall be well out at sea before the brigands will have time to examine every thread of my cast-off garments, and before they find out that they have been cheated.' Then crushing my hands in his, he continued: 'And you, my comrade, what shall I say to you? It is more than life you have given me—it is more than the life of all those who are dear to me. It is my honour you have saved by saving this scrap of paper on which a dying man traced his last words, and intrusted them to me.'

Raymond started to his feet. "Merciful God!" he exclaimed, "is it possible that my father, before he died, had time to write the name of his assassin?" And grasping his friends' hands, he continued: "Oh, friends and brothers, what don't I not owe to you? Your father was sacrificed for my mother and her children. It was because your father was bent on fulfilling the sacred trust of a dying man that he was dragged from prison to prison. O, my friends, how shall ever I recompense this sublime devotion?"

It was Jean who answered. "You owe us nothing, Raymond, but your friendship. Your mother has done everything for us, and we owe to her all that we are—we two men—and my mother and sisters——"

"Our father only did his duty," interrupted Léon, "and poor and humble as was his station, I am proud of being his son."

Jean now resumed his perusal of the manuscript. "All this," continued Nantel, "only inflamed my curiosity, but I dared not ask a question, as it seemed to me that it would be like asking him to pay me, as it were, for the

services I had rendered him by preserving this precious letter. When I say letter, I mean a square envelope, closely sealed, without any superscription, and containing only a small bit of paper. No. 23 had put it into an envelope the better to preserve it. I was very much puzzled, but taking all the precautions I had witnessed into consideration, and remembering the change of name, I made up my mind that 23 was one of the prime-movers in the resistance shown to the *coup d'état*—not one of those instigators who put other poor fellows in front and disappear themselves at the first hint of danger, but one of those who stand forward boldly and drink the wine they have drawn. I, therefore, did not treat him as an equal, but as a superior, and endeavoured to show by my respect and devotion the appreciation I had of his services. He did not notice this for some time, and then he asked what I meant. I told him of course. 'Alas! my poor fellow,' he replied, 'you are very much mistaken. I never took the smallest interest in politics, and my misfortune has nothing to do with it.' But I was not convinced. 'You are exiled on that ground?' I said. 'True,' he replied—'because that was the easiest way of getting rid of me.' 'And why did they change your name?' 'Because they wished to rob me of my identity. My name is Laurent Cornevin—and I'm a person of no importance whatever. I was a mere groom in a stable. But the greatest sometimes tremble before the lowliest.' He passed his hand slowly over his brow, and if to drive away painful thoughts, and then he added slowly: 'I have trusted all this to you, my good Nantel, because you are a worthy man and I respect you, and because, thanks to this paper which you preserved, a certain crime will be punished. But let us never speak of these things again.'

"Cornevin was a very taciturn person, and soon relapsed into his former mood—he hardly seemed to notice anything. The weather was frightful. Our vessel rolled and tipped, and I was deadly sick for a week. On the whole, we were not badly treated. Our food was the same as the sailors', with the exception of their ration of brandy. We had fresh meat occasionally, and wine. At night we were allowed a hammock. We had a good captain. He said to us the day we started: 'So long as you behave well I will grant you every privilege in my power, but at the first sign of insubordination I shall come down heavily on you.' The system was a good one, for all went smoothly. Still we suffered from want of air and exercise, for, as we only went on deck in divisions, each of us could at the most remain there a couple of hours each day. When Cornevin's turn came, he invariably seated himself on a coil of rope, and in spite of rain or sun, wind or cold, there he sat, with his eyes fixed on that side of the horizon where he supposed France to be. One day he seemed sadder than usual, and I tried to cheer him, but he shook his head. 'How can I cheer up,' said he, 'when I think of my wife and five little children. What has become of them? They were dependent on my labour, and when I was taken away they had only sixty-five francs in the house.' At another time, he looked at the water in a way that frightened me. 'What are you thinking about?' I asked. He smiled sadly. 'Don't be troubled Nantel; my life isn't my own,' he said. 'God allowed me to witness certain things, so that I might become the instrument of His justice. I have a task to fulfil—and I shall fulfil it!' 'These are all the confidences which Laurent Cornevin made to me, and yet I am sure he trusted me. He liked me too, for he offered me his ration of wine very often, saying: 'Drink it; you need it more than I.' He was right in saying so, for all his sufferings had in no degree injured his magnificent physique. One day, when I expressed my

amazement at his superb health, he said that a fixed idea was a splendid preservative, and that he was not sick, because he could not be.

"I was overjoyed when, one day, a sailor told me that in less than twenty-four hours we should sight land, and he was right, for the next morning, when I was on deck, I espied afar off a light-brownish mist, which I was told was Guyana. Finally, there rose two high arid rocks, and then the various islands. At last we cast anchor off the Salvation Isles. Everyone on board the ship was in ecstasies, except Laurent, who sat as usual on his coil of rope, apparently oblivious of everything. Seeing this, I shook his arm. 'Look!' I cried. 'We have arrived!' But he shrugged his shoulders. 'What is there to rejoice at?' he asked.

"True enough, and I recognized the justice of his question when we landed. Nothing was ready to receive us. A single block-house and a store-house stood there. We slept under boughs, like so many savages in the woods, and shivered in the white fog, which is regarded as so unhealthy that it is called the Europeans' winding-sheet. As to food we were not as well off as on board the 'Rhône.' Twice each week a steamer brought us provisions from Cayenne. After answering to the roll-call, night and morning, we were at liberty to wander at will over the island, snare the birds, fish and catch turtles. As my trade had been that of a carpenter, I built a little hut which I shared with my comrade Laurent, in whom I had begun to notice a certain change. He was still taciturn, but a look of resolution had succeeded his earlier seeming resignation. He now talked of his family without a break in his voice, or a tear in his eye. 'By this time,' he said, 'their fate is decided; either God has taken pity on them, or He has forgotten them; in that case they have long since died.'

"I was the more astonished at this change in Laurent as the vigilance with which he was guarded had increased rather than relaxed. He was persistently called Boutin, and he as persistently replied that Boutin was not his name. He was never allowed to make one of the gang which was employed on the vessels which occasionally put into port. Once, however, he succeeded in speaking to a sailor, and asked him to post a letter for him at Cayenne. But this letter was intercepted. It only contained, so Laurent afterwards told me, the words "I am living," and was addressed to a widow in Paris, and signed with his real name. He was taken before the governor, condemned to solitary confinement for fifteen days, with half rations. When I saw him at the end of the fortnight, he said to me: 'I don't blame the governor. He thinks me a dangerous man, for he has been told so. He is a soldier and obeys orders. But the others!'

"Who these others were he did not tell me, but after this his habits changed. Instead of working with me on little articles which we sent to Cayenne for sale, and the proceeds of which naturally improved our table, Laurent spent all his days in the woods, and did not appear until the roll call at six. One night he said to me: 'Nantel, my resolution is taken. I have prepared everything, and to-morrow I make my escape!' I shuddered, for I was well acquainted with the difficulties of the passage past the Devil's Island, where a small boat was sure to be swamped even on the calmest days. But supposing he got past this point safely—what then? He had neither arms or provisions. 'You can't do it!' I cried. 'I shall try, at all events,' was his cool reply; 'and more than that, I shall succeed. God, who uses me for His ends, will protect me!'

"It was by no means the first time that Cornevin had expressed the conviction of having been chosen by Providence for an especial mission.

I, however, had always turned the subject when he said such things, as I did not like the glitter in his eye. I really feared that his reason would be shattered by the trials he had endured. But that night I determined to be frank, and I told him that he took his fancies for realities, and I reminded him of the many attempts at escape from this island, not one of which had succeeded. 'Comrade,' he said, 'I thank you. I know very well that I can only hope to escape by a miracle, but cease to oppose me—the miracle will be performed. A voice tells me so!' I honestly believed that my companion had gone mad. Alas! he was not the first whose reason had fled. Others among us also spoke of the voices they heard. I was tempted to go to the governor, but I concluded that treason under any excuse, or with any motive, is still treason. I decided that if I could not restrain Laurent unaided, he must be allowed to accomplish his destiny. He then told me that he had built a boat, and he intended to row out to sea, where he hoped to find some vessel which would take him on board. The next day he showed me what he called his boat. Good heavens, it was a mere raft, and so imperfectly put together, that the first wave would tear it asunder! Two long branches flattened at the end were the oars.

"And is it in that thing," I asked, "that you intend to brave the waves?" On hearing this he lost patience. 'Enough!' he cried, 'I won't hear one word more either of advice or remonstrance.'

"However, I could not let him start like this. I set to work in the woods, and in a week I built a boat which would stand in fair weather. The next Sunday all was ready, and what a Sunday it was! for my companion was to leave on the morrow. Each time I looked at him tears filled my eyes, but he was gay enough, anxious only on one score—respecting that letter which he cherished with so much care. He put it into a small vial and hung it round his neck. The night came—we both answered to the roll call, and as usual retired to our hut. We waited there awhile, and then Cornevin said: 'Come—it is time.' We started off. Certain precautions were necessary, for we were not allowed to roam over the island at night time. It was about eleven o'clock, and the night was very dark. The tide was going out among the rocks, and, as usual, the water seemed very agitated. Heavy yellow waves broke with a great noise on the pebbly beach, but on looking out further I saw it was as smooth as a billiard table. 'Laurent,' I said, 'think well—it is not yet too late.' 'Help me to launch the boat,' was his reply. It was a difficult thing to do, but we succeeded nevertheless, and my fragile craft at last floated beside a rock. Laurent pressed my hands. 'As long as I live,' he said, 'I shall remember what I owe to you.' 'Poor fellow,' I thought, 'you will not have many hours to remember this.'

"However, he pushed off his boat. Both the wind and the current were in his favour. For more than an hour I stood there, and then I climbed a high rock. The moon had risen, the sea glittered like a mirror of silver, and half a league away I saw a tiny black spot—it was Cornevin's boat. 'He will row all night,' I thought, 'unless submerged by some wave, and in the morning his strength will have gone. Then his provisions will be exhausted, and he will die of hunger!' I had just said this when, all at once, I saw a light cloud, as it were, on the horizon, a cloud which seemed to be approaching the island. A hope was aroused in my breast. If it were a ship! I concentrated all my attention on this cloud, and soon doubt became impossible. It was really a ship under full sail coming directly towards the island. I had laughed at Laurent. I had thought his faith in

Providence utter madness, and now I believed. It seemed to me that I was a witness of one of those startling miracles which sometimes confound the reason and crush the pride of man. Was it not a miracle, indeed, to see a ship in these waters? for during my year of sojourn on the island the only ones I had seen were those belonging to the French government and connected with the penal colonies. I shuddered! What if this vessel were one of these! Laurent, in that case, would be brought back in irons and then sent to Cayenne. My next agony was, had my comrade seen this ship which I distinguished so clearly from the height at which I stood. I looked at the tiny black speck which, as well as I could judge, was now half way between the island and the vessel. Laurent had hoisted his sail, for the appearance of the boat had changed, and it looked like a gigantic sea-bird. However, I dared wait no longer, for I was half a league from camp, and day was near at hand. Fortunately I got back safely.

"'Boutin! Boutin! Boutin!' read the guard at the roll call. Naturally there was no reply, whereupon the guard turned to me. 'Where is your comrade?' he asked. I replied that I did not know; that he had left me the night before, and I had not seen him since. As nothing more was said to me just then, I got away as soon as I could, and returned to the rock from which I had watched Laurent's departure. I had been away three hours, and now it was in vain that I scanned the horizon—I could see nothing. I returned to the camp hardly expecting to hear anything of my comrade. But that is precisely what did happen. The steamboat running from Cayenne to the island was unloading; I was sent down to assist, and I heard one of the sailors say that he had seen an American brig off the island that morning. She had been to Demerara for repairs after a terrible gale. 'So,' I said to myself, 'Laurent is free at last, and can use that letter which cost him so dear.' I was so happy at this idea that I was perfectly indifferent to the threats uttered that night by the guard, who was furious when no Boutin appeared at roll call. It was on the following afternoon that the truth became known. I was just eating my dinner when one of the guards burst in like a bombshell, and in a furious tone commanded me to go with him to the governor. I obeyed, but I affected great astonishment at being summoned in this way. 'Just wait a bit,' was the guard's grim rejoinder. 'You will soon be polished off!'

"The governor's face was anything but reassuring, and I saw at once that there was trouble in store for me. 'Where is Boutin?' he cried. As I persisted in saying that I did not know, he declared he would make me know, and ordered two soldiers to march me down to the shore where Laurent's boat lay. It had been washed up by the waves, and two soldiers had discovered it. My heart sank within me! So my poor comrade had been drowned after all. But I was comforted presently on finding that the boat was in good condition. The sail and provisions alone were missing. Was not this a proof that Laurent had been taken on board of the American brig? 'Now,' said the governor sternly, 'will you continue to deny the part you have played in Boutin's escape?' I did continue to deny it, of course, but as I was the only carpenter on the island my work betrayed me. I was sent to prison, and kept there a long time. Fortunately carpenters were in demand at Cayenne, and at last I was sent there. The next year I married. I heard nothing of Laurent Cornevin for a long time; but one evening, while I was in a *café* at Cayenne, I heard an American sailor relate how once in passing the Salvation Island his ship had picked up a French convict. I took this sailor aside, and discovered that the convict in question

must have been Laurent Cornevin, and that he had worked his passage to Talcahuana in Chili on board the brig."

V.

JEAN CORNEVIN now rolled up Nantel's manuscript and looked at his brother and Raymond. "Well?" he asked.

They did not answer. They had expected something more than this abrupt termination, and they were disappointed. "Is that all?" inquired Raymond.

"All, Nantel has not written one word more," said Jean, and in answer to his companions' repeated questions, he added impatiently: "Can't you see that this narrative has cost Nantel a prodigious effort. Don't you think that if he had known any more I should have elicited it from him. For two whole months I teased Nantel with questions, hoping that in his narrative he had forgotten some petty detail that would be of value to me. No, he knows nothing more than is written there." So saying, Jean rose. "I consider you basely ungrateful," he resumed, "that instead of rejoicing at these unexpected revelations, you merely deplore the absence of more. Look at this. Let us see where we are. Our suspicions have become certainties; we were convinced that the general was assassinated in the presence of a witness. Now we are sure of it. Yesterday, Léon, you thought your father was dead—now you know that if he bears any name it is that of Boutin. We know he did not die at Cayenne, but that in 1853 he landed in safety at a small town in Chili, having a letter written by General Delorge in his possession."

But Léon here spoke: "I do not wish to differ with you, dear brother, but the very story which to you proves our father's existence, to me proves his death. Let me explain, and you will see I am right. In 1853, our father was free and in Chili; that was ten years ago. Why have we not heard a word from him since? If you admit that during these ten years he has forgotten us—my mother and ourselves—his plans of vengeance, and France, I will say, 'Yes, it is possible he still lives! But not otherwise.'"

However, Jean was not convinced. "I see what you mean," he answered, "but I have faith, the faith that Nantel had when he saw the vessel approach from the distant horizon to rescue our father from his frail boat. I know he is living. God has spared his life for His own good purposes."

Who was right? Raymond himself could not decide, but he leaned toward Jean's belief. However, the young men decided to say nothing to their mothers until they had seen M. Roberjot, who listened attentively to Nantel's narrative. He said little, but it was plain that he adopted Jean's view. He proposed to take certain steps at once; the first being to apply to the police for information respecting Boutin. A week later he received the following note from the Prefecture de Police: "Boutin (Louis), thirty-four years of age, born in Paris. Seized with arms in his hands behind a barricade in the Rue du Petit-Carreau, on the 4th of December, 1851, and sent to the Conciergerie. Sent to Brest on the 21st of December, under the custody of Inspector Brichant. Reached Brest on the 22nd. Admitted to the hospital the same day, having been injured in attempting an escape. Sailed on board the transport vessel 'Rhône' to Guyana. Died on the 29th of January, 1853, while attempting his escape on a boat of his own construction. Body not found."

This note was absolute proof of the accuracy of Nantel's narrative. If it had been equally easy to prove that Boutin and Cornevin were one and the same, the Count de Combelaine might well have trembled. Two other points, moreover, were made clear by this note: first, that the government had no idea that Cornevin had escaped with his life, and that M. de Combelaine fancied himself forever rid of the witness of his crime. However, these results were not enough for Jean, whereupon Léon proposed to write to the French Consul at the small Chilian town, where Cornevin had landed. "Take care," said Jean. "Remember that a single inconsiderate step may arouse the suspicions of our enemies, and put them on the track. Remember that if our father be living this will expose him to new dangers." On another occasion he remarked, "Well, I will consent to believe in my father's death if you will have it so; but in that case, where is the letter Nantel spoke of? Don't you feel certain he must have confided it to some one to deliver to us?"

Jean's manner was at the same time so mysterious, that Léon remarked, "I am quite convinced, that my brother is about to do something very rash."

Indeed a week later Jean announced that he meant to start for Chili at once. "You are mad!" said Léon.

"Not quite," answered the young painter; "only I should become so if I were to remain here in this state of uncertainty."

It was useless to argue with Jean, as Léon well knew; but he thought he had one irrefutable objection. "And the money?" he asked.

"I have a thousand crowns."

"And do you think of going to Chili with that trifle?"

"No, I intend to ask you and Raymond for more."

"And suppose we refuse?"

Jean shrugged his shoulders. "In that case I shall take the MSS. to Madame Delorge and our mother, and I am quite sure that when they know what I want to do they will give me money enough."

This was so perfectly true that Léon and Raymond felt conquered. "Do as you choose," they said; and as their united purses did not supply the requisite amount, they applied to M. Ducoudray, who enthusiastically exclaimed; "Jean is right, and if I were not so old I would go too." And he agreed to obtain Madame Cornevin's consent.

"It would be a great comfort," he said to her, carelessly, "if Jean took a notion to travel. There is a great deal of political excitement just now, and if he stays in Paris, reckless as he is, he will be in trouble by the end of the month."

The very next day the poor mother urged her son—the son from whom she had been so long separated—to go away again, and at the end of the week all preparations being completed, Léon and Raymond saw him embark at Bordeaux for Valparaíso. M. Roberjot had duly bidden him good-bye, saying: "Come back soon, Jean, and bring proofs with you. It seems to me that I already feel the first puffs of the tempest which will sweep away the empire, and the Maumussys and the Combelaines, the Princesses d'Eljonsen, the Verdales, and all the Drs. Buiron, into the bargain."

Had many persons heard the honourable deputy talk in this fashion they would have shrugged their shoulders and said, "Nonsense!" and apparently with reason, for never had the empire seemed stronger. The political machine wound up on the 2nd of December, continued to work with apparent smoothness. Paris was still the city of *fêtes* and pleasure. Gold

flowed freely; and those on the summit of the social ladder vied in squandering money in the most foolish and reckless way. The luxury was simply prodigious. Any foreigner who on a fair spring afternoon drove through the Bois de Boulogne returned home bewildered and dazzled by the magnificence of the display, just like the simple Switzer who wrote: "Paris is the city of millionaires! All the inhabitants have horses and carriages."

However, war with Mexico had just been declared, and there were sundry misgivings despite the pompous phrases with which the government tried to justify and exalt this strange expedition. If a questioning voice was raised in the chamber of deputies, it was quickly silenced. The newspapers had a great deal to say, but dared not say it. And yet the public knew—or thought they knew—the real motives of this adventurous campaign. They talked of imprudent speculations and wholesale robbery, and the Republicans declared that the real aim of the Mexican war was to insure the payment of an usurious interest to influential personages who had purchased claims on the Mexican government for a mere song. In fact, the French army was to do bailiffs' work—and for the advantage of whom? The names of several of the creditors were given, and even the amount of their probable profits. It was affirmed that M. de Maumussy would have a share of the cake, as well as De Combelaïne and the Princess d'Eljensen; and those who heard these tales marvelled at the corruption of the times. If this expedition to Mexico had proved a success, it would have been a vastly different matter: for France pardons everything to success. But, undertaken by folks who knew nothing of the country they proposed conquering, nor of the men with whom they would have to fight, this fatal war could only lead to disaster. The very beginning was a check, soon repaired, it is true, and gloriously avenged—but afterwards? The Archduke Maximilian of Austria was sent to Mexico, and proclaimed emperor against the will of the Mexicans. The small French army became lost in an immense stretch of country, and suddenly France learned that, acting on the pressure of the United States, the Imperial government had decided to evacuate Mexico. Then came the retreat and embarkation of the French army under the command of Bazaine. The dénouement of the drama was not far off. Having vainly begged the Emperor Napoleon for men and money, the Empress Charlotte of Mexico went mad; and then one morning the news came of Maximilian's execution.

The shame of having been powerless to prevent this execution was all that the empire derived from the Mexican war. As to what it cost France in men and treasure no one knew until much later. "But it was a glorious idea—the greatest of the whole reign," repeated certain officious persons over and over again. It may have been so; only while this beautiful idea was being put into execution, Prussia had gained the battle of Sadowa and crushed Austria. True enough, it was said that the empire had been promised a compensation by Count von Bismark. "The new-born power of Prussia should not alarm us—quite the contrary," said one of the orators of the day in the chamber of deputies.

"Quite the contrary, is very well said," wrote M. Roberjot to Raymond Delorge. "However, I am not an optimist, and I think I see the beginning of the end."

VI.

RAYMOND Delorge and Léon Cornevin had left Paris, shortly after Jean's departure for Valparaíso, M. Roberjot having said to them :

"Go without uneasiness—I will constitute myself your faithful correspondent, and if anything occurs which renders your presence here necessary, I will telegraph to you."

And he kept his word, no small merit, with a man as frightfully busy as himself. He wrote daily to the exiles, as he called them, and exiles was the word, for it was not of their own free will that they left Paris. But life is full of inexorable necessities, and when a man's without a fortune he is compelled to submit to the exigencies of a profession to earn his bread and butter. This was why Léon Cornevin had started in search of a new field of labour, directly after resigning his position at the railway company. He was by no means exacting—his ability was remarkable—he was highly recommended, and yet, such was the crush in Paris, that every corner was filled. He could find literally nothing in the city or its environs. Tired of struggling, he at last resigned himself to accepting a position on a Spanish railroad, and started for Madrid.

As for Raymond, he had been sent to Tours by the Minister of Public Works to assist in studying the means of preventing the periodical inundations of the Loire. And the young man was delighted by the change. He was for the first time freed from the fixed idea which had filled his life since boyhood. He seemed to see unknown horizons opening wide before him. He realized, so to speak, that he was young, and that he was only twenty-seven, and that he had had no youth.

The inspector whom he was to assist proved to be the best of men. He was the Baron de Boursonne, the last survivor of one of the oldest and best known families in Poitou. It is true that nothing annoyed him more than to hear himself addressed by his title. "I am Father Boursonne," he used to grunt in a tone which was by no means paternal. A former pupil of the Polytechnic School, M. de Boursonne, had once espoused the Saint Simon doctrine, and had spent a handsome fortune in experimenting in that direction. However, while his former associates had all succeeded in finding honourable and lucrative posts, the baron had been kept in the background and given subordinate positions, far below his abilities. Still his heart had not been soured or hardened by this injustice, but his temper had become exceedingly irritable. Folks said of him : "A good man, no doubt! An honest man, too—but an oddity!"

The truth is that he took infinite pains to appear precisely the contrary of what he really was. An aristocrat in the best sense of the word, with a high-cultured, sensitive mind, he affected the language of a peasant and the most absolute cynicism. One of his greatest delights was to wear the shabbiest garments in the world as if to furnish a contrast to his noble, refined countenance. Raymond, when he first called upon the inspector, was dressed to pay a morning visit, and the old gentleman looked at him for a moment in astonishment. "Well! well! Monsieur Delorge," he said, "you have a good tailor—but isn't it a great bore to be dressed like that?" And as Raymond, disturbed by this astounding reception, did not know what to say, M. de Boursonne continued : "Come on! We will go and see our workmen." Then without giving Raymond time to change his clothes he

dragged him to the banks of the Loire, and seemed to take especial delight in seeing the young man bespattered with mud from head to foot, and wet up to his knees.

Despite this malicious pleasantry, however, and several other mild practical jokes in the same style, Raymond had not been with the baron a week without detecting the real man under the rough envelope and recognizing how worthy he was of esteem and affection. On his side, M. de Boursonne conceived a very hearty liking for the young engineer, and chose him as his chief assistant in his studies. The plan which M. de Boursonne had formed, in view of curbing the inundations of the Loire, soon compelled him to leave Tours and establish himself in the centre of operations. He at first chose Saumur for his headquarters. And Saumur, with its wooded heights, its old château, its islands, white houses, and spreading fields was very charming.

Unfortunately, on the very day when the baron arrived in search of a suitable lodging, he was walking along with his nose in the air, when he was nearly knocked over by a party of pupils from the cavalry school, who dashed madly down the street. "There are too many soldiers here for me," he said to Raymond. "We will go somewhere else!"

They next tried Rosiers, and remained there. Not because this little town is one of the prettiest mirrored in the blue waters of the Loire, nor because the hills of Saint Mathurin have irresistible attractions, but because the inn of the Rising Sun proved scrupulously clean; because Béro, the innkeeper, gave a pretty room to the baron and a comfortable one to Raymond; because this same innkeeper also turned out to be a wonderful cook, and had some excellent wine in his cellar. And, moreover, it was the end of September, there were plenty of partridges in the vicinity of Rosiers, and M. de Boursonne, despite his years and near-sightedness, was an unwearying sportsman.

It was a Saturday when the worthy baron reached Rosiers and installed himself at the Rising Sun, with his suite of draughtsmen and engineers.

A week later he and Raymond could truly assert that they were as well acquainted with the environs as any man in the provinces. They had seen all there was to see, from the Roman camp at Chênehutte, the castle-keep at Trèves, and the church of Cunault, to the Celtic remains at Gennes and the Fountain of Avort; from the terraced gardens sloping down to the Loire to the high perched Manor of Ville Haudry, once so magnificent, but so neglected since the count's marriage with Mademoiselle Rupair.* After all this sightseeing, M. de Boursonne and Raymond went to their work—which was work indeed, for it consisted in tracing out a vast system of dikes, reservoirs and canals which it was calculated would make the hitherto disastrous inundations of the Loire a positive benefit to the dwellers on the banks.

The baron and Raymond generally breakfasted early, and went off for the day with a basket of provisions prepared by Béro himself on the previous evening. At sunset they turned their faces homeward, and dined together at the Rising Sun, in a little private room, the windows of which looked out on the highroad. Then the baron lighted his pipe. Raymond smoked a cigar, and they sat talking and playing cards until ten o'clock. Sometimes an old artillery officer, who also usually dined at the inn, joined them. He,

* See "The Gilded Clique," by Emile Gaboriau.

too, had been a pupil at the Polytechnic School, and his good qualities and advanced opinions had won M. de Boursonne's admiration.

A few days elapsed thus in peaceful monotony, when one morning, while the baron and Raymond were waiting for Bérú to bring in breakfast, they heard a great clatter of horses' hoofs over the highway. M. de Boursonne, who was curiosity itself, looked out of the window. "The deuce!" he cried. "Come here, Delorge."

Raymond complied. A dozen or fifteen horses were passing along the road, all of them superbly caparisoned, and led by servants in long English vests and high boots.

"What's all this cavalry?" asked the baron of Master Bérú, who at this moment came in with a dish in either hand. "Is there to be a circus at Rosiers?"

But the innkeeper was quite shocked by the suggestion, and he answered in a dignified way: "I fancy, sir, that you did not notice the coronet on the saddle-cloths."

"A coronet! Ah! I beg the coronet's pardon. Delorge, look, your eyes are better than mine." And he put up his glasses. "Yes, to be sure," he said; "Bérú is right. But what does that prove?"

The innkeeper bowed with considerable solemnity, and replied: "It proves that the horses belong to the duchess."

The old baron started as if a wasp had stung him, and, in a tone of comical surprise, exclaimed: "Good heavens! Can it be that we have a duchess in this neighbourhood, and Bérú never told us of it?"

"Sir," replied the innkeeper, "she does not usually live in the country."

"Ah! I breathe once more."

"She resides in Paris, but she generally spends a month here at this season."

"And what is the name of your duchess?"

Bérú straightened himself up. "Maillefert—Duchess de Maillefert," he replied.

"Then," said Raymond, "she is the owner of that château I saw on the road from Gennes to Trèves."

"Precisely."

The baron had taken his seat at table, and while he went on eating he said: "We hear of the duchess, but tell us something of the Duke—What the deuce is the name?"

"Maillefert, your honour, Maillefert."

"Who is the duke?"

"He is dead, your honour."

M. de Boursonne poured out a glass of wine, "*De Profundis!*" he murmured. And when he had drained his glass: "You hear, Delorge," he said, "this duchess is a widow. The next question is, has she a heart to conquer? Come, Bérú, tell us some more. Is she young?"

"Young! That depends."

"What do you mean by that oracular reply?"

"I mean to say, your honour, that when you see her passing by, superbly dressed, no one would think her more than thirty—only—"

"Well?"

"She must be double that age, for she has children who are as old as that."

"Indeed," cried the baron. Any one who did not know him would have thought he was highly interested. "Children!" he exclaimed; "grown up children! And how many has she?"

"Two. A son, Monsieur Philippe, who has been called the duke ever since his father's death; a handsome young fellow though somewhat pale. He rides about on horseback and drinks like a fish. And then there is one daughter. Mademoiselle Simone."

"Simone!" repeated the old gentleman. "That is a very nice name."

"Do you think so? Well, if I had a daughter I shouldn't call her Simone; but, then, there is no accounting for tastes. They have a mania in that family for giving that name to the girls, in memory of one of their grandfathers, who was quite famous, at least so I've heard. Still the name seems the loveliest in the world when you know the young lady who bears it——"

"Do you hear that, Delorge?" said the baron.

The interruption apparently annoyed Bérú. "Well," he added, "she may not be any prettier than other girls, but she's better than any of them. And if you go into some of the houses of the poor round about here, sir, you could hear all about her."

"Indeed! Then Mademoiselle Simone is very charitable when she is here for the month?"

"Mademoiselle Simone never goes away, sir."

"Bless my soul!"

"It's odd, sir, isn't it? But they pretend that mother and daughter don't get on well together. So Mademoiselle Simone lives at Maillefert all the year round, while her mother and brother live in Paris. It can't be very gay for a girl of twenty to live alone in this big deserted château with no other society than her English governess, who is thinner and stiffer than a stick, as yellow as butter, with tearful eyes, and a nose as red as my own."

M. de Boursonne had now just finished breakfasting. He rose to his feet, and as he lighted his pipe he said: "All the same, I should have liked a circus. It would have been an amusement."

Bérú smiled discreetly. "I think," he said, "that the duchess's arrival will prove more amusing to you gentlemen than any troop of mountebanks could have been."

"And how, pray?"

"Because she likes excitement. She never comes alone, but always has a number of stylish young men and ladies with her. And they hunt and fish, dine and sup, dance and have fireworks—and, in short, keep up one continual *fête* by night and day."

At this moment M. de Boursonne caught sight of his servant standing at the door with a basket of provisions. "Tell me some more this evening," he said to Bérú; and addressing Raymond, he added: "It is time for us to set to work, my boy." Whereupon he left the room, leaving the innkeeper in a high state of displeasure at being so unmercifully cut short in his gossip.

As the old engineer strode along the embankment fringing the Loire, he muttered: "What singular people we French are! Now, here is this Bérú, who prates of equality, and who, as soon as the duchess arrives, falls into a fever of adoration. He is a democrat, he says, but he would give his inn and all his saucepans to hear himself called Monsieur de Bérú." The baron paused for a word of approbation from Raymond, but the young fellow was occupied with very different thoughts. So he continued: "This family is a good one—there is none higher than the Mailleferts. It is one of the very few remaining in France, it is of the pure old stock; it is connected with the Sairmeuses, the Montmorencys, and the Champdoces."

At this point he stopped to draw a long breath; and then he exclaimed—"Raymond!" The young man started.

"Upon my word," resumed the baron, "you look as if you had fallen from the skies! What on earth are you thinking of?"

"Of nothing, sir, I'm afraid."

"Ah! Suppose I told you that you were thinking of Mademoiselle Simone de Maillefert?"

Raymond coloured like a school-girl. "Indeed, sir," he replied, "why on earth should I think of a girl I never saw, and whom in all probability I never shall see."

"I don't know about that," answered the baron. "Besides, when I was your age, the few words we have heard from Bérú would have kindled my imagination respecting her. What a strange sort of life she must lead, thus deserted by her family!"

"Pshaw!"

"Why 'pschaw?' I should like to see you alone in that huge château *tete-à-tete* with the English governess. How is it that she isn't married? She ought to be. Unless I am greatly mistaken, these people are as rich as Jews. They have an estate in the Loire Inférieure—a piece of property which is larger than the Republic of Saint Marino, and the Principality of Monaco united. The island of Noirmoutiers was once theirs. What on earth is the reason why this little girl isn't married!" He walked on a few steps in silence, and then exclaimed; "Perhaps she is deformed—or she may be horribly ugly, humpbacked, lame, bald, or deaf. Who knows? No; that fool of a Bérú would have said so."

"Besides," said Raymond, quietly, "a young girl, as rich as you describe is never ugly."

The old engineer burst out laughing. "True, my boy—true! Well, then go ahead and weave your romance. You have all the accessories—the rivers, the hills, the woods, and an old castle. What a lovely framework for a love adventure! Do you have dreams? Well, let me tell you, here is a new sleeping beauty waiting for prince Charming to come and wake her."

"Unfortunately I am no prince," said Raymond, laughing.

"True, my dear fellow. You have that immense advantage, and I congratulate you heartily on your lowly station. You are young, and a pupil of the Polytechnic School."

"And poor."

"For the present, yes. But you have a future before you. The family that would not open its arms to you would be difficult to suit. It seems to me that Madame de Maillefert cares precious little for her daughter."

Raymond shook his head. "It is an outrageous thing," he answered, "to leave her here in this way."

"It is very strange, certainly. I really feel quite desirous of making the acquaintance of this Duchess de Maillefert. But you, Delorge, must know her."

"I! Why should I know her?"

"You are a Parisian."

"In one sense I am, of course; but——"

"In a sense which must have caused you to meet the duchess in society."

However, they had now reached the scene of their operations, and in his usual hasty fashion the baron gave his orders, and put his men to work.

For Raymond and the old engineer not to know anything of the Duchess

de Maillefert even by reputation, showed that they neither of them went into society, and were quite ignorant of what occurred in the highest circles of the Second Empire. They must have never read the newspapers—which were full of her name. The duchess was an intimate friend of the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon, and the young Duchess de Maumussy—she was a rival of the Baroness Trigault and of the celebrated Sarah Brandon, Countess de la Ville-Haudry; she was in fact the leader of the seven or eight women who enjoyed the enviable and precious privilege of filling the pages of society journals. There was not a gilded youth in Paris who did not know her from having seen her in the Bois de Boulogne—at the races, and the opera, at the seaside, and at Baden-Baden—at skating clubs, and shooting matches—everywhere, in short, where there was noise, display and a crowd. She spent, it was said, more than a million francs per annum. Van Klopen, the celebrated man milliner—that impudent Hollander who for ten years had been the arbiter of feminine elegance—Van Klopen, who said, “my dear” to the fashionable beauties he served, declared indeed that the Duchess de Maillefert was his very best customer. If misfortune had overtaken her the newspaper reporters ought, by good rights, to have clubbed together and allowed her a pension, for during years they had netted large sums by describing her wonderful toilettes, her equipages, horses, and eccentricities, and by repeating the clever sayings that fell from her lips. They had described how she supped at the Moulin Rouge, how she drove down the Champs Elysées with a cigar in her mouth, and how, having had a dispute with a cabman, she stunned him with a torrent of slang as pure as anything that could have been heard in the lowest part of Paris.

However, the baron and Raymond spoke no more of her that day; in fact, they had forgotten her, when on their way home in the evening two capacious carriages going towards the railway station passed them on the high road. “Ah!” said the baron, “the duchess comes to-night, it seems—her carriages are now going to meet her, I fancy.”

Indeed, when they reached the Rising Sun they found the innkeeper looking for them, so as to be able to inform them. “The duchess arrives by the seven o'clock express.” The worthy man was radiant as he spoke, and his round face shone like his sign.

“We saw the carriages,” answered the baron, “but we were surprised not to see Mademoiselle Simone in one of them.”

“Yes, its odd enough,” said the innkeeper, “a young girl who hasn't seen her mother for months, ought to hasten to meet her!” Raymond, whom the baron was watching out of the corner of his eye, was listening attentively. “But it is always like that,” continued the innkeeper; “I have heard that mademoiselle would very much prefer it, if her mother and brother never came to Maillefert at all. Accustomed as she is to her solitary life—living like a cloistered nun—it must bewilder and frighten her, to see such a crowd of people, and hear so much noise all at once. She must feel like an osprey suddenly let loose in the sunlight, and so she gives the company the cold shoulder. Monsieur Casimir, the major-domo, tells me that while there has been company at the château during the last two years she has not set foot outside her own room.”

“And the duchess yields to these caprices?”

“She can't prevent them, for Mademoiselle Simone, saint as she is, has a will of her own. And perhaps she's right in a way—for the month the duchess spends here is a pretty costly one.”

“Pshaw!” said Raymond; “the Maillefert family is wealthy.”

"I don't know about that!" muttered Bérú, "I don't know about that." And drawing closer to Raymond and the baron, he added in a low, mysterious voice, "You never know where you are with these great fortunes! But I do know one thing, that the duchess has been selling property."

"You can't mean it!"

"I do, indeed. You know the beautiful farms in the valley on the way to St. Mathurin—well, they once belonged to the Maillefert estates; but, last winter the agent cut them up into small lots and sold them. I bought a patch for a couple of thousand crowns, myself." But, the innkeeper suddenly checked himself and listened. The sharp, shrill whistle of a locomotive could be heard. "There's the train," he cried, "and in five minutes the duchess and her party will be at the station."

The baron laughed that peculiar laugh which prevented people from knowing whether he were speaking in jest or in earnest. "Well, Master Bérú," he said, "I congratulate the Maillefert family on having a devoted adherent and a faithful servant in you."

This did not please the innkeeper, for he drew himself up in his white vest, and in his most dignified manner replied: "I am not the servant of any one!"

Raymond laughed aloud.

"Excuse me, dear Master Bérú," said the baron, gravely. "I fancied on seeing your delight——"

"I was simply pleased, sir, because the arrival of the duchess makes business lively. For instance, her major-domo and the young duke's valet come here a great deal——"

"What an honour!" interrupted the baron, who was growing tired of the amusement afforded him by studying the worthy innkeeper. "Are we to have no dinner to-night?" he asked; "or must we fast in order to honour the duchess's return?"

Suddenly recalled to his duties, the innkeeper felt ashamed of his chatter and rushed from the room. His voice was soon heard in the passage crying: "Madame Bérú, bring the gentlemen their dinner."

The gas was lighted when the Baron de Boursonne and Raymond took their seats at table. As they partook of some excellent soup, the baron exclaimed: "That fool of a Bérú is quite a character." And then hearing a sudden grating of wheels, he added with affected solemnity: "The duchess has certainly arrived!"

Her carriage seemed indeed to have stopped before the inn. A strange voice could be heard in the vestibule, a thin, sharp voice at once imperious, and affected in tone. "Bérú," said its possessor; "Bérú, where the deuce are you? Bring lights here instantly—my servants have forgotten the lanterns. And bring a glass of water to my mother!"

At this moment the door of the dining-room was thrown open, and a young man of about twenty-five came in with his hat on his head, a cigar between his teeth, and a glass in his eye.

"That must be the young duke," said the baron in a low voice.

He was not mistaken, M. de Maillefert was of medium height, thin, or rather emaciated, with a hollow chest and round shoulders; a pair of long light whiskers framed his weary looking face, which was very pale, with high cheek bones, and thin and colourless lips. "The deuce take you!" he cried to the innkeeper, "why don't you take the water to my mother?"

At this moment Madame Bérú hurried forward with a tray in her hand, but all at once a whirlwind of velvet and lace swept into the room. The

wearer was a tall woman with pale yellow hair, which escaped profusely from under a small straw bonnet with a white *aigrette*. She wore one of those light coloured travelling dresses, short and capriciously trimmed, which had made Van Klopen's fortune.

Pouring herself out some water she drained the glass. "I was dying of thirst," she said. And then dipping a corner of her embroidered handkerchief in the water, she bathed her eyes, murmuring: "The idea of not being able to get a glass of water at the station!"

Meanwhile, talking and laughing were heard outside, and the carriage lamps were flashing. Unaffectedly curious, the baron rose and looked out; he fancied there were seven or eight persons in the carriages. But he had little time for his observations, for the duchess and her son speedily joined their guests, the vehicles rolled away, and the ordinary quiet of the night came over the little inn.

VII.

ON the morrow of the duchess's arrival, Raymond was smoking a cigar at the door of the Rising Sun and waiting for the baron, when the postman approached and handed him a letter. Raymond at once recognized the handwriting of his friend M. Roberjot. He broke the seal and hastily read as follows:—"Dear Raymond—As you will remember, it was agreed when your brother Jean left that all his important letters should be addressed to me, lest his plans and the real object of his journey should in any way be discovered by his mother or yours. Jean has remembered this, and I have just received a letter from him, of which I send you a copy."

This copy was in Roberjot's own writing. He had evidently not cared to confide the task even to his trustworthy secretary. "After the vilest voyage," it began, "prolonged to an extraordinary extent by contrary winds and disheartening calms, I at last arrived at Valparaiso, well and full of hope. But I rejoiced too soon, for it was by no means an easy matter to get from Valparaiso to Talcahuana, where my father landed. I was told that I must wait a month, to which I naturally objected, for under the circumstances a month struck me as an eternity. I therefore searched for a private mode of conveyance, and, thanks to the energy and intelligence of a compatriot, I found a worthy man who, owning half a dozen horses, agreed to convey me and my baggage quickly and cheaply. But this agreement was a mere figure of speech. To travel on horseback through a charming country is, as you know, very nice, but it is not the most expeditious way of getting over the ground. At last, however, after a protracted journey, my guide said to me: 'Look—here we are!'

"I looked and espied a long row of one-storied houses, built of bricks dried in the sun. And this was the town of Talcahuana. It had been so often destroyed by earthquakes that its four thousand inhabitants were tired of building anything but huts. Ah! my dear friend, you will believe me when I say that I was nearly suffocated with emotion when I entered the village in the dim twilight. As I traversed the lonely streets, or rather lanes, I said to myself that my father was perhaps living in one of these very cabins, and that within forty-eight hours, perhaps, I should find him, and receive from his hands that letter which would give us the weapon we had longed for during fifteen years.

"Although I found a comfortable bed in the house of a French trader, I

could not sleep; for I longed for daylight to begin my search. It came, but my first investigations brought no result. The climate of Chili is delightful, and life seems easy and simple there. The fair Chilians are so attractive that no ship ever anchors in Concepcion Bay without several sailors deserting. For this reason the arrival of strangers is not so much remarked, and thus my task became all the more difficult, and I saw myself compelled to adopt a course which I had sworn to you, half in jest, I would try—namely, that of questioning every living being in the town, one after the other. I asked if they had ever heard of a Frenchman named Cornevin, or Boutin, who had arrived at Talcahuana early in 1853 on board of an American brig. I added, to recall him to their recollection, that he was a political prisoner who had escaped from the Devil's Island; and then I ventured on sketching a portrait of my father, my own faint recollection of him being assisted by a careful description given me by Nantel. But, alas! so many years had elapsed—so many American brigs had anchored off Talcahuana—that no one could give me the slightest clue.

"I began to feel discouraged, and said to myself that Raymond and Léon were right in advising me not to undertake this journey, when all at once I was favoured with a piece of wonderful good-luck. Talcahuana is not a large town, and people freely occupy themselves with the affairs of their neighbours. I was soon known, the motive of my voyage was discussed, and people became quite interested in the young French painter who was looking for his father—a political exile. I knew this, and was therefore hardly surprised when, one afternoon when I was kept in-doors by the heat, I was told that some one wished to see me. This some one proved to be an old smuggler, who had been detained for two months on the other side of the Cordilleras, and who had returned to Talcahuana only the night before. He perfectly remembered the Frenchman I had described, and the story of whose escape he had often heard; he could not remember his name, however; still he was sure I might hear more by applying to an old smuggler named Pincheira, who lived at a little port only a short distance off.

"In ten minutes I was on horseback, and in a couple of hours had found my man. As soon as I began my story he told me that he remembered my father very well, and he at once gave me such details that I saw I was on the right track at last. Our father was known to Pincheira under the name of Boutin. He was nearly famished, he said, when he first knew him, and he was clad in rags. Pincheira's compassion was aroused, and he was fully repaid for the help he gave, for he had never seen so industrious a man, or one more greedy of gain—indeed our father saved every sou he earned, declaring he needed to become rich, and would do so, or die in the attempt.

"A year later it appears that Pincheira's son took a notion to try his fortune in Australia, and my father went with him. Pincheira himself knew nothing more, but he declared that his son now living at Melbourne could undoubtedly give me further information. The old smuggler's last words when I left him were—'Your father is either dead or a millionaire!'

"To-morrow I start for Valparaiso, where I shall find some means of getting to Australia. Good-bye for some time, my dear friend. I shall write to my mother. My regards to Raymond and Léon.—Yours gratefully,
JEAN."

To this epistle M. Roberjot had added a few words: "You see, dear Raymond, that Jean has done wonders. I send a copy of this letter to Léon by this same mail. Your mother and Madame Cornevin are in good health,

though they both miss their sons. There is nothing new here, but a change must soon come, for the embarrassment of the Imperial Government is more and more visible. Shall we have a Prussian war? Shall we have a liberal ministry? The one and the other perhaps—perhaps neither of them. You will have heard through the papers of the marriage of M. de Maumussy with a young Italian princess of great wealth. He has also been created a duke in honour of the occasion. My honourable friend Verdale asserts that M. de Combelaine has now decided to marry with or without Flora Misri's consent. So if you happen to know of an heiress there would be a suitable husband for her! I have only ten more words to say. Be prepared for any event, for troublous times are at hand.—Your sincere friend, ROBERTOT."

Leaning against one of the doorposts of the Rising Sun, Raymond read Jean's letter over and over again. A new-born hope filled his heart, and at the same time he felt a sting of self-reproach. Jean Cornevin had acted, while he, Raymond Delorge, had done nothing—literally nothing. He was only aroused from his meditation by the boisterous voice of the baron, who gave him a friendly slap on the shoulder, and called out: "Are you as deaf as I am near-sighted? A nice pair we make, to be sure! Haven't you heard the landlord tell us three times that breakfast was on the table?"

Raymond had never acquainted his kind friend with the tragic mystery of his life; so he tried to smile, and followed him to the dining-room. But it was in vain that he tried to shake off his gloomy thoughts. He had not a word to say to M. de Boursonne, who, on his side, was gayer and more talkative than usual. However, when they started forth the fresh air restored Raymond in some degree. It was delightful weather, one of those mellow autumnal days with which Anjou is favoured every year. Never had the lovely valley of the Loire been more beautiful. The air was full of perfume and the buzz of bees. September rains had kept the meadows as green as in spring time, and August suns had imparted the softest tints to the woods. The leaves of the poplar trees, trembling in the breeze, seemed woven of gold thread. Over the hedges, scarlet with haws, hang delicate branches of clematis. "One month more of such weather, my dear Delorge," said the baron, gaily, "and we shall have completed our work from Tours to Rosiers."

They were then working on the left bank of the Loire, between Gennes and Les Tuffeaux, and to reach the scene of operation they had to follow a delightful road skirting the river, and shaded by tall, overhanging trees. Behind them trudged their attendant, carrying the lunch-basket. The dead twigs and leaves crackled and rustled under their feet as they walked along, but suddenly from the direction of Maillefert, there came louder music, the baying of dogs and the blowing of horns. "They are hunting near here!" cried the baron, and he stood still to listen. "If I'm not mistaken," he added, "the fair duchess must be entertaining her friends in the woods to-day." And he called to the attendant who was a native of the place. "Are there any deer in those woods over there?" he asked.

"I don't think so, sir. I don't fancy there are any deer about here except in the Parc de la Ville Haudry—but they are not allowed to be shot."

"Then what are the dogs after?"

"Oh! when the duchess comes, sir, she brings foxes in barrels with her, and lets one of them loose whenever she wishes some amusement, so I suppose the dogs and the huntsmen are galloping after a fox of hers."

The baron nodded. "Excellent!" he said; "a most aristocratic way of

breaking their necks!" By this time he and Raymond had reached their men, who were at work, and they soon forgot all about the dogs and the hunt.

Daylight was waning and a light fog was creeping up the valley when Raymond left off work. He lighted a cigar, and while waiting for the baron to jot down the result of certain soundings, he took a seat at the foot of a tree beside the road. He had not been there for five minutes when down the road under the spreading vault of the lofty trees, there came a woman who was walking very rapidly. She was simply dressed in brown silk, and wore a broad brimmed straw hat. Her face was entirely hidden by a parasol which she held in front of it to ward off the rays of the setting sun right before her. Raymond was looking at her with a certain amount of curiosity, admiring the grace of her walk, when, to his surprise, she suddenly stopped short but ten paces off. She seemed to be listening and waiting. Then all at once she closed her parasol, darted through the scanty hedge and made her way into a small grove, where she stood perfectly still. Raymond was struck by the timid, frightened expression of her face. She had not seen him, and had no suspicion that he was near her, but he could see her very clearly. She was a girl of twenty or thereabouts, with a fair, gentle face; a blonde, with large blue eyes.

"She is hiding," thought Raymond, "but from whom, and why?"

It was not long before he learned. The grating of wheels and the clatter of hoofs caused him to turn his head, and he saw an open carriage drawn by a pair of magnificent horses coming towards him. It was one of the same carriages he had seen on its way to the station the night before. There were two ladies carelessly lying back in it. They were both of them pretty, but exceedingly overdressed. Following the carriage came a number of horsemen, and in the centre of this group rode the Duchess de Maillefert looking bold and conspicuous in her close-fitting habit and tall hat.

"It is true," said a mocking voice behind the young engineer, "I should never think the duchess was more than twenty."

Raymond turned. The baron stood beside him with his hands in his pockets and an ironical smile on his lips. However, the young man made no rejoinder. All his attention was turned to the grove where the young lady had taken refuge. Suddenly he saw her emerge cautiously from its shelter, listen, and then, considering the danger over, return to the highway. As she did so she perceived the two engineers. She gave vent to an exclamation of mingled surprise and alarm, and looked quite ready for flight. But gathering her courage together, she passed them, acknowledging their respectful salute with a slight bow.

Never was a man so astonished as the baron. He stood there with his eye-glass on his nose, and his hat in his hand. "Where on earth did this girl come from?" he asked at last.

Raymond did not answer. He would have found it difficult to explain why, but he shrank from describing the little scene he had witnessed to the baron. "She must have sprung up out of the ground," continued M. de Boursonne. "If she isn't a ghost, I should like to know her name."

The baron's usual attendant had overheard these remarks, and he now came forward with a respectful bow, and said: "That young lady, sir, is Mademoiselle Simone de Maillefert."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir, and she came out of that little grove, where I saw her hide when she heard her mother and the party coming. It's very strange, sir, that

you've never seen the young lady before, for she's always in the woods and the fields, sometimes with her English governess, sometimes on foot, and sometimes on horseback, and I must say that I never saw any one take hedges and ditches better than she does."

With a gesture, the baron thanked the attendant for his information, and when he was alone again with Raymond, he said. "I can't get this young girl out of my head. Don't you think it queer that she is so much afraid of being seen by her mother? Do you not remember what the innkeeper told us?"

"Yes; but Bérus is a simpleton," replied Raymond.

"No doubt," rejoined the baron. "However I would give a good deal if the old artillery officer would come and smoke his pipe with us to night!"

Some good fairy must have heard this wish, for hardly had they finished dinner than the artillery officer appeared, ushered in by the landlord of the Rising Sun. And he was not alone. "He had taken the liberty," he said, as he entered, "to bring his nephew, Monsieur Savinien de Chènehutte, who was passing the day with him." M. de Chènehutte was a good-looking fellow of thirty, wide-shouldered and red-faced, with a self-satisfied air, and dressed carefully, but in atrocious taste. He was well-off, and lived on his estate. In reality, his name was simply Bizet, but he had adopted the name of Chènehutte to distinguish himself from his brothers. He liked it, and as it was the name of one of his estates, he put it on his visiting cards.

To the baron's first questions respecting Mademoiselle de Maillefert, the old artillery officer answered, with the indifferent air of a man who is too much absorbed in himself to care for others: "I know nothing about the young lady."

But De Chènehutte was better informed. "This girl's ways are very peculiar, certainly," said he; "she came to Maillefert about five years ago, and when people said that her mother had abandoned her, as it were, they wanted to be kind to her. The most distinguished ladies made advances to her, but she received them in the most haughty way, and did not even return their visits.

"Which certainly does not speak well for her bringing up," said the baron.

"They are all the same in that family," continued young De Chènehutte, "they despise all their neighbours. Do you know where the young duke goes for companions when he's here? Why to the cavalry school at Saumur!"

"Impossible!"

"It's true, I assure you—ask my uncle there. We are too insignificant for them. They bring their guests from Paris and Angers."

The baron was jubilant: he had found his man. "Listen to what this gentleman says, my dear Delorge, for it is very interesting. So the duchess, then, never invites the people hereabouts?"

"No, for she knows her invitations would not be accepted."

"And why?"

M. Bizet drew his chair closer to the baron's. "Because," he answered in a mysterious whisper—"because the duchess is a most compromising woman."

"Impossible!"

"Ask my uncle. He will tell you that her fortune, which was once enormous, is nearly gone; he will tell you also that her reputation has gone with it—that each year she makes herself conspicuous with some fresh simpleton. As for her *fêtes*, men can of course go to them, but not their wives and daughters."

If the baron enjoyed all this, Raymond did not, so he abruptly asked, "But what has all this to do with the young lady?"

M. Bizet de Chêneshutte winked in a way which was meant to be very acute. "Oh!" said he, "she's quite another person. The boot there is on the other leg. She is as cunning as her mother is reckless. And yet to hear the talk of the peasants, you would suppose her to be the best and purest, as well as the most charitable, of women."

"And that strikes me as being a pretty good reputation."

"Yes, but it's only talk. Now, look at it for yourself. Is Mademoiselle Simone forced to live as she does? No! She is no uglier than other women, and she is immensely rich."

"But you just said the duchess was ruined."

"And that is quite true," answered Bizet; "but the young lady has a fortune in her own right. Maillefert belongs to her, and her wealth is simply enormous."

The old artillery officer burst into a laugh. "You may believe my nephew," he said, "for he is well informed."

The nephew coloured. "All the world knows——" he began.

"Yes, and you better than all the world; for last year, when you came to the conclusion that Mademoiselle Simone would make a charming Lady of Chêneshutte, you took pains to inform yourself most fully."

The flush on Bizet's face deepened to crimson. "I made a great mistake last year," he said, "and I am ready to admit it. I reflected in time, however, and saw that if the young lady isolates herself in this manner it is because she has a good reason for doing so. Now, when you look at a girl's reason, you generally find a lover."

Raymond, who had been gradually growing angry, now started up impulsively and exclaimed: "You lie, sir; you lie!"

The bright colour on Bizet's face died away. "You must recall those words, sir," he rejoined.

Raymond shrugged his shoulders. "Most willingly," he replied, "if you will name this young lady's lover."

"No, sir; I will do nothing of the kind. You shall hear from me!" and so saying, Bizet rushed from the room.

"I am glad he's gone!" exclaimed the artillery officer. "Why is it that young people are always quarrelling?" Then turning to Raymond he added:

"I don't say that my nephew was right, but you will admit your language was unparliamentary."

"Sir?"

"There are some words that should never be heard, particularly when a man has had a good dinner, as my nephew always has when he dines with me." As he spoke, the old officer knocked the ashes out of his superb meerscham and put it carefully into its case. "Silly—superlatively silly!" he muttered. "Where am I to look for my nephew now, I should like to know? I wonder if he has gone to the Café du Commerce. For this matter must be settled at once, and I count on you, baron, to bring M. Delorge to his senses while I quiet my nephew." And so saying he went off.

As soon as the baron heard the door close he walked up to Raymond, and crossing his arms, exclaimed: "You drank too much wine at dinner, or else you have lost your mind."

"Why, sir?"

The baron raised his arms despairingly. "He asks why!" he cried, in

a tone of compassion. "I also ask why you have seen fit to fly into a passion on account of the senseless chatter of an underbred idiot. I thought the man very amusing, and I expected to spend a very pleasant evening, which you have spoiled entirely."

But Raymond had not yet recovered from the passion he had been thrown into by what he had heard. "The fellow said things that made my blood boil," he exclaimed.

"What things?"

"He said the young lady had a lover."

"What if he did? What is it to you?"

Raymond was somewhat embarrassed. "Isn't it clear," he said, "that it's so much low slander, prompted by the refusal he received from the young lady's family?"

The baron shrugged his shoulders up to his ears. "And what if it is? How on earth does that affect you? Are you Mademoiselle Simone's brother, friend, or relative? Do you know her? Have you ever spoken to her?"

Raymond occupied himself with lighting a cigar, and seemed to have a great deal of trouble with the matches. "I dare say I have been absurd," he said.

"Indeed you have! Utterly ridiculous."

"However, no man shall ever insult a woman by speaking of her in that way in my presence. And if all men rebuked such scoundrels promptly, the reputation of young girls would not be at the mercy of such light tongues. I have a sister, and if some villain spoke of her as this man Bizet spoke of Mademoiselle Simone, I would be grateful to any man who undertook her defence."

At any other time the baron would have been quite interested by Raymond's excitement, but he wished now to cool him down and not add oil to the flames. He therefore said: "That is all very well—but you have said enough on this occasion. The artillery officer will bring his nephew back so you must shake hands with him, and let the matter end."

At this moment the street door opened—but it was not the Bizets, returning; it was a young man who asked to see M. Raymond Delorge in private. "Oh! you may speak before this gentleman," said Raymond.

The young man thereupon seated himself, with his legs well apart and his hands on his knees, and then, in a solemn tone, he explained that he had been sent by his friend, M. de Chènehutte, who had been grievously insulted by M. Delorge, in view of arranging a duel.

"Tut! tut!" said the baron.

But Raymond interposed. "I am quite ready to meet Monsieur Bizet de Chènehutte," he replied.

"Then, please name your seconds, sir, and we will arrange preliminaries."

Raymond had not thought of this. "I have not had time to choose seconds, sir, but it will not take long. Where shall they meet you?"

"At my house, sir—not two steps from here," and the young man handed his card to Raymond, bowed, and retired with the dignity of a high priest.

M. de Boursonne was out of patience. "I hope you are satisfied now, Delorge!" he cried. "You have a duel well started—but where are your seconds coming from?"

"I depend on you, Sir, to act as one of them."

"On me! Upon my word, you must be quite mad if you think that I, your chief, will sanction your folly by my presence. No, indeed. It would

be a disgrace, and only increase the scandal. Don't you realize that you will become the talk of the whole country side? And for the matter of that, it will be the same with Mademoiselle Simone. A nice service you have rendered that poor girl. A perfect Don Quixote, you are! You think I will be your second! You are mad, my dear boy."

It is possible that this reply was not unexpected by Raymond. "Very well," he replied, "then I will ask M. Bérú to find me two men in the neighbourhood who have formerly served in the army. They won't refuse."

The baron did not seem to hear. He was walking up and down the dining-room smoking his pipe. Suddenly, however, he exclaimed: "No, Delorge, you must not do that. You are a good fellow and I will serve you. Of course you see that I shall get into trouble, but never mind. I will take one of the assistants with me and go and see your men."

"Ah! sir," began Raymond who was greatly pleased.

"That will do! That will do!" said the baron. "You may thank me to-morrow—just now we will talk sense. What weapons do you prefer?"

"It is not for me to choose."

"Never mind that, answer my question. Which do you prefer, pistols or swords?"

"I don't care."

"The deuce you don't! Are you bad with both?"

To the baron's great surprise, all Raymond's animation had vanished. He had turned pale, and it was in a low voice that he replied: "I am both a good shot and a good swordsman, sir, so unquestionably superior with both, that I feel myself to be acting almost dishonourably in meeting this young man."

The baron's eyes twinkled behind his glasses. "Are you in jest?" he asked.

"By no means, sir; I was never more serious. For years I have lived in the hope of fighting a duel with a man whom I mortally hate, and who is one of the most skilful shots and swordsmen in Paris. For years I have never missed practising daily in a shooting gallery and a fencing room. I challenged my enemy—he refused the challenge; but my dexterity remains to me."

The baron did not ask a question; which was very nice on his part. He left the room, and when he returned in an hour later he said to Raymond: "It is all settled; you will use your sword to-morrow morning at eight o'clock."

VIII.

RAYMOND warmly expressed his thanks and tried to excuse himself for the distasteful task he had imposed on the old gentleman. "I am glad," he said, "that my adversary has selected swords, for with those weapons I can manage the affair as I choose." And this was all he said.

The baron saw that the young fellow's mood had changed during his absence, for he was now pale and depressed; and as the old gentleman went to his room, he said to himself: "What does this all mean? I wonder if what the boy said about his superiority was mere talk? He surely can't be afraid!"

No—Raymond was not afraid, but during that hour of waiting he had reflected. His irritation had abated, and he passed condemnation on his

own conduct. Had he any right to risk his life? His father had been assassinated by scoundrels who lived unpunished, honoured, and rich; and instead of exclusively thinking of revenging his murdered father, he was, like the Don Quixote the baron called him, about to fight the first foe he came across, for the good fame of an unknown woman. With such thoughts, it was impossible for him to close his eyes, and in the morning his face showed such signs of sleeplessness that the baron could not refrain from saying: "Good Heavens, my dear fellow, what has gone wrong with you? Are you ill?"

The tone in which these questions were asked told Raymond what were the suspicions in the baron's mind, and so thus summarily recalled to the situation and its exigencies, he said "I was never better, sir, I——"

But he was interrupted by the inkeeper, who, having listened at the door to some purpose, now came in and said that as the gentlemen were going out so early, he had taken the liberty of preparing something for them to eat. This attention delighted the old engineer. In vain did he talk with a certain roughness of manner; his heart was very soft, and he realized now that he was very fond of Raymond, so when he saw him about to eat, he exclaimed: "Look out; a man who is going to fight a duel should keep his stomach empty. It is better in case of accidents."

"Never fear!" cried Raymond.

"I do fear—and remember that I have seen very inexperienced persons do clever swordsmen much harm."

The more the baron watched Raymond the more puzzled he was by the singular variations of his mood. "There must be some mystery in this boy's life," he said, "of which I know nothing."

However, Raymond drank a glass of wine and then gaily said "I'm ready, my dear baron," whereupon they started off.

The meeting place was on the other side of the Loire, on the outskirts of a little wood, and as they walked rapidly over the bridge the baron said: "I'm willing to wager my life that Bizet will make an apology."

But he was mistaken. Round about Saumur almost all the young men are swordsmen, and none of them are cowards—although some may be fools, and Bizet probably the greatest among them. Besides, he had spoken so much and so violently the night before at the café of Rosiers that there was no retreat open to him. He was well known in the province, and occupied a certain position. Did he not possess a pair of thoroughbreds, one of which he himself rode at the Saumur races in a pink jacket? Had he not also five dogs, three of which were turn-spits, but which he called his hounds? So was he not entitled to deference? Raymond soon pointed him out to the baron, for he was approaching the meeting-place by another path.

His uncle, who looked sadly out of temper, was with him, acting as one of his seconds, together with a young man who was pale and troubled. On the outskirts of the grove the two adversaries stopped and bowed to each other, while the old artillery officer, setting all established rules at defiance, went up to the baron, and said: "Tell me, sir, are we to let these young idiots quarrel for a mere word?"

"It is certainly absurd," answered the baron. "Let your nephew name the lady's lover and my principal will withdraw his offensive word."

"Go on, then—if you will," grumbled the officer, and he drew two swords from a serge wrapper and handed one to each of the two adversaries.

They took up their positions, and he stepped back. While the seconds had been talking together, Raymond had caught sight of several pairs of

eyes peering from among the bushes. "Am I crazy?" he said to himself. "It is certainly a most extraordinary freak of imagination."

But it was not imagination. The news of the duel had spread through Rosiers, and as amusements and strong emotions are as rare there as in all similar places, a considerable number of people had promised themselves the pleasure of witnessing the scene. They had discovered the place appointed for the meeting, and had been waiting there since sunrise. There was even one lady present, and her imprudence injured her reputation, for people charitably interpreted it as proof of the great interest she took in M. Bizet de Chènehutte.

Raymond knew nothing of all this, but Bizet did, and the knowledge caused him to cross swords with considerable vigour. He had no doubt of victory, for he had taken lessons of a good master, and he was quite satisfied with his proficiency. Alas! in ten seconds he recognized his own weakness. Vainly did he multiply his attacks—turning and bounding, retreating and advancing—he only succeeded in putting himself out of breath. Cold and composed—as quite at ease as if he had been using buttoned foils, in a fencing-room, Raymond seemed to be playing with his adversary until, with one quick turn, he knocked the sword from Bizet's hand and sent it flying.

"Enough!" cried the old officer, dashing between them. "Enough!"

This was also the opinion of his nephew; but he felt so many pairs of eyes upon him that, in his rage and humiliation, he determined to make an effort to retrieve the combat. "No, it is not enough!" he cried, picking up his sword. "That was a mere accident."

But this was not the view his uncle took of the case, for approaching the baron, he said: "It is clear that my nephew is as much at the mercy of your man as a mouse would be in the claws of a cat. For Heaven's sake, don't let them go on!"

Without answering yes or no, the baron went towards Raymond and said in a low, quiet voice: "No misplaced generosity—I see you are a clever swordsman—finish the matter with a little flesh wound; this might go on for hours."

Raymond hesitated. He had resolved to punish Bizet, but his wish was to disarm him over and over again until he acknowledged himself conquered. He felt, however, that he must accede to the wishes of his friend. So he answered: "As you please, sir."

The baron now moved aside again. "Take your positions, gentlemen," he said, "and after the next bout we shall call on you to stop, whatever be the result."

It was with the blind rage of a wild beast that Bizet now threw himself on Raymond. His cheeks were whiter than linen, his eyes suffused with blood, and his lips tightly compressed. Foolish though he was, he had divined the intentions of his adversary, and the thought of ignominious defeat was more than he could bear. He even wished to receive a wound. He would have preferred a pretty bad one rather than leave the field without a scratch. He, therefore, tried rather to be wounded than to defend himself, and Raymond on his side managed so well, that his sword merely pierced the fleshy part of Bizet's arm.

"Touched!" said that interesting young man, dropping his sword and falling into the arms of his seconds, who, on seeing the blood, ran to his assistance. Then three or four stifled exclamations were heard in the thicket; but the anxiety was not of long duration, for the old officer, who knew some-

thing of wounds, looked at this one, and said, half smiling, "He won't die this time!"

Bizet opened his eyes. "No, no," he said, in a faint voice; "it is nothing—the feeling of that cold, cold steel is over."

He was perfectly delighted by this solution, which saved him from the ridicule which would otherwise have been his portion. The superiority of his rival was so manifest that his wound was rather a distinction than aught else. When he was on his feet again he advanced to Raymond, and in the most tragic tone, exclaimed: "I confess my error, I implore you to accept my apologies, and I wish the whole universe could hear them."

"Ah!" whispered the baron mockingly in Raymond's ear, "you are now exalted to an enviable rank; you are now Bizet's best friend!"

"That is to say I have made a fool of myself," thought Raymond, who at present realized that the duel had had a great many spectators.

M. Bizet perfectly understood Raymond's generosity, and, much to his credit, he was not angered by it. He insisted on the party of six going home together. Poor Raymond! What with the baron, who overwhelmed him with sarcastic congratulation, and De Chêneshutte, who crushed him with protestations of friendship, he walked along with bowed head, feeling much as if he were going to a dentist's to have a tooth pulled out.

They had just reached the bridge when a lady on horseback was seen trotting quickly towards them. "Mademoiselle Simone de Maillefert," said Bizet, with a most respectful bow, as she passed by; and he then snatched hold of Raymond's hand. "I assure you," he said, "now that I know your sentiments for that young lady, she will always be sacred to me."

This speech fully realized the prediction of the baron, who had said the evening before: "If you think you are doing this young lady a service you grossly deceive yourself."

Thus easily is a woman, though she be as pure as snow, compromised and injured. Small towns are especially pitiless in this respect, and everyone at Rosiers knew that Mademoiselle de Maillefert had been the cause of this duel. In vain did Raymond say: "On my honour I know nothing whatever about this young lady, I never even spoke to her. I am only here for a short time, and shall probably leave without even being introduced to her. She does not even know of my existence. I undertook her defence just as I should take that of any woman who was grossly insulted."

But this was unknown language for Rosiers. It is only in romances that ladies find such disinterested defenders. When a man risks his life for a woman he has some tangible reasons. All this was implied by Bizet's tone, and his wink signified more—it meant this: "If we meet Mademoiselle Simone on our road, it is because she knew of the duel and was anxious."

All these considerations weighed so heavily on Raymond that he was silenced. He realized, too, that the less he said now the better. In vain did he try to get rid of his recent adversary—Bizet clung to him as obstinately as lime to the wing of a bird caught in a snare. Wishing to be especially agreeable, he insisted on talking about Mademoiselle de Maillefert, and laid the blame of his foolish words on his uncle's good wine. "I admit, Monsieur Delorge," he said, "that I should have been delighted if she had been willing to marry me. Not that I think her pretty, but she is very nice. She is not clever; all the women, in fact, call her very dull, but she has plenty of good common sense. Do you know that she manages all her enormous fortune herself?"

"My dear sir!" expostulated Raymond.

But no, the ingenuous youth continued: "I am pretty clever in business affairs myself, but this girl of twenty is cleverer than I. She attends also to some of her mother's and brother's matters. They are perfect sieves, they are—they never keep a sou. She directs the labourers, understands the crops, manages the vineyards, and pays off the workmen——"

"I entreat you," interrupted Raymond, "to select some other topic of conversation. Anything you choose, except——"

"Except what interests you most!" continued the simpleton, with a bland smile. "I admit that it is a little trying when a man is modest to enumerate all the treasures he possesses, or is about to possess. But I wish to repair my error of last night. In all Anjou there is not another woman like the one you have chosen. I admit that she is very haughty, and although familiar with the peasants, she treats us with unsupportable pride. But a husband like yourself will soon change all that. She has excellent qualities. She understands the management of money, and is economical in spite of her great wealth. Her tastes are simple; no luxury or nonsense in her toilets, which are too plain, in fact." He sighed as he spoke, and with his hand on his heart, continued: "What a pair we should have made had she been my wife! In ten years we should have quadrupled our capital! I mean what I say. I should have discarded the duchess and her brother, and I advise you to do the same. The duchess would crunch down the devil and his horns, and in a short time there would be nothing left. As to the young duke, he has long since got rid of his last inch of land, and he is up to his ears in debt. In Paris, at Angers, at Saumur, even at Rosiers, he owes money to everybody—lawyers, usurers, and tradespeople."

If Bizet had been told that Raymond had great difficulty in refraining from flying at his throat and strangling him, he would no doubt have been much surprised. Still this was the fact. When they reached Rosiers, Bizet was very anxious to take him to his uncle's to breakfast, declaring that reconciliations were never real ones until they were sealed over a bottle. But Raymond could stand no more. "Impossible! Another time!" he replied, abruptly, and bowing to his recent adversary, he went off with long strides in the direction of the Rising Sun.

Now that all danger was over, the old engineer thought he had a right to take the bridle off his tongue, and so as he walked on beside Raymond, he muttered: "A nice day this has been! A day well begun! It is not noon yet. We have time for several more acts of folly."

"Ought I to have apologised to that idiot then? Is that what you wished me to do?"

"No—by no means. I should think you ought to be proud, however, that after ten years' practice, which have given you wonderful dexterity, you have achieved the great feat of pricking Monsieur Bizet de Chênehutte in the arm."

A cruel foe acquainted with Raymond's past could not have wounded him more severely. He turned very pale, and in a horse voice he replied: "Don't say things like that to me, sir. You will make me regret that I did not nail the animal to a tree like an impaled butterfly."

"I should not have lifted my finger to prevent you," grumbled the baron. "But," he continued, "between you, you have hopelessly compromised this young lady."

"I am sick of hearing about her!" cried Raymond. But he did not tell the truth. Something told him that this young girl, whom he as yet merely knew by name, would have a decided influence upon his future. In what way he knew not, but the sentiment clung to him.

"This Delorge is a strange fellow!" said the baron to himself. "I am convinced that there is some mystery in his life, the knowledge of which would give me a key to the strange contradictions I find in his character. He must be made to tell it me, that is all there is about it!"

On reaching the inn they were received with joyous exclamations by Master Bêru, who stood watching for them at the door, with his snowy apron and knife stuck in his belt. "I told my wife this morning," he said, "that nothing would happen to you, but all the same, she insisted in going off to church to burn a taper before the altar."

"Dear me!" said the baron. "This is too much. We are the talk of the whole country side."

"I have said nothing, your honour. I never talk about what goes on in my house. It was M. Bizet who told the whole story. He talked half the night long at the café to a room full of people."

"Delightful!" muttered the baron, as he strode angrily into the dining-room, followed by Raymond.

Bêru followed them, and apparently desirous of pleasing them, he fell tooth and nail on M. Bizet de Chênehutte. "He was conceited and miserly," he said. "He lived on bread and onions at home, so as to save money to make a show with at Rosiers. And I'm not surprised," he said, "at his bitterness against Mademoiselle de Maillefert, for she has unwittingly been the cause of his being laughed at by every one round about here. He asked her to marry him. Heaven only knows how he dared do so, or what put such an idea into his head. The idea of such a thing! As if a Maillefert would become Madame Bizet." At this point the worthy innkeeper looked round to see if any one was listening, for he liked to stand well with everybody. Then, lowering his voice, he added: "Everybody was on M. Delorge's side, and everybody was pleased when it was known that M. Bizet was wounded. There were two or three servants from the château at the café last night, and they could hardly contain themselves. I have just seen the old gardener, who has Mademoiselle Simone's confidence, and he was going from house to house with the air of a man who was trying to find out something."

Contrary to his habit, the baron let the conversation drop, and as soon as Bêru was gone he turned to Raymond and said: "This threatens to turn out a fine adventure!"

Raymond restrained a movement of impatience. "I cannot conceive, monsieur," he said, "how a man of your intelligence can pay any attention to this innkeeper's foolish chatter." The baron smiled sweetly. "Go on my boy," he said to himself; "I will push you so hard that you will have to tell me your secret." Then, aloud, he replied, "What is there so ridiculous in this worthy man's narrative? Mademoiselle Simone hears that a young engineer has fought a duel in her defence, and she sends to find out something about this gentleman.—Now, what is the use of turning so red?"

Raymond had certainly coloured, but it was with anger. "Really, sir," he replied, "you are making me pay dearly for the service you have rendered me."

The baron said no more; he had gone as far as he dared, and for the rest of the day he made no further allusion to Mademoiselle de Maillefert. But that evening, at dinner, Master Bêru handed them each a letter, which had been brought, he said, by a servant in livery.

The baron promptly opened the envelope bearing his name, and after glancing at the card it contained, he exclaimed: "Upon my life, Delorge, I

believe our adventure is bearing fruit. Open your letter and see if it be not a counterpart of mine. Open it, pray."

Raymond complied, and found an invitation card, which was couched as follows: "The Duchess de Maillefert presents her compliments and requests Monsieur Raymond Delorge to do her the honour of spending Saturday evening (October 24th) at the Château de Maillefert."

The baron was delighted. "Well! what have you to say to that?" he asked.

"I say that it is most extraordinary."

"And why? It is your duel, my dear fellow, that has won us this honour which Bizet would gladly have given his best horse for. 'This is what I call conquering an invitation at the point of the sword.'"

"Oh!"

"But there is no 'oh' about it. The duchess has it in her power to show you her gratitude, and she is eager to seize the opportunity."

"And yet—"

"You will be presented to Mademoiselle Simone."

Raymond reflected for a moment, with a frown on his brow. "I don't think I shall accept the invitation," he said.

The baron raised his arms in despair.

"You would never refuse it!" he cried.

"I am hesitating."

"And why?"

"Because, sir," answered Raymond—"because——" He stopped short. He was seeking for an excuse, for on no account whatever would he have told the truth. "Because," he said at last, I should have the air of going there to be thanked."

"That is not badly said," answered the baron, who was, however, by no means duped by these words. "As for myself," he continued, shaking the invitation, "I shall accept. Yes, savage, rustic, peasant as I am, I must see one of those *fêtes* which have so scandalized that innocent creature, Bizet. My dress-coat is at Tours with the rest of my luggage, and I shall write to-night to have it sent to me."

IX.

THERE are two Châteaux de Maillefert. The old one, formerly known as the Château de Chalendray, once crowned the summit of the slope and commanded the course of the Loire. Dismantled by Richelieu, however, it soon fell into ruins, and to-day ivy and brambles climb over two crumbling towers, which are all that remain. The new château is built lower down the hill. It is a large building in the best style of Italian art, with two wings and a flight of broad low steps in front. The wide entrance-gates, which were spared by the Revolution, are at once curious and beautiful, and the carvings in the chapel have great artistic value. The gardens are unrivalled, notwithstanding the comparative neglect in which they have been left for years. Designed in the style of the gardens of Marly, they form a succession of terraces connected by marble steps descending to the waters of the Loire. Clusters of trees, tall shrubbery and vines screen the walls, while beyond are dense masses of park trees. An avenue, nearly a thousand yards long, and shaded by century-old elms, leads from the high-road to the modern château. And up this avenue walked Raymond and the baron at about ten

o'clock on the Saturday evening specified in their invitation. After much perplexity and doubt, Raymond had decided to accept this most unexpected opportunity of making the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Simone de Maillefert, and he had tried to convince himself that he went to the château for any other reason than the real one. "It is pure curiosity," he said. "How could I love a girl whom I never spoke to? Before three months are over I shall have left Rosiers for ever, and I shall never hear her name again!"

However, he was out of spirits and dissatisfied with himself, and barely answered the continual observations of the baron, who himself was by no means in an over-amiable frame of mind. He wore his dress-coat, which had come from Tours, and was full of creases. It was one of those good old coats with long tails and tight sleeves, which, after doing twenty-five years' good service, are cut up by economical mothers into an entire suit for a boy of ten years old. "What nonsense that fool, Bérú, said!" he grumbled, "when he pretended that the duchess was *obliged* to sell her land. When people are ruined they don't give such *fêtes* as this. Why, the mere illumination of this avenue costs as much as it would cost you and me to live on for a month!" And he was right, for countless Venetian lanterns were disposed among the trees, and gave the approach to the château a fairy-like aspect. "It is positively humiliating to come on our legs," continued the old engineer, "we ought to drive up in state. You ought to have borrowed your dear friend Monsieur Bizet's cabriolet!"

They were indeed probably the only guests who arrived on foot. The few pedestrians they espied among the trees were only persons attracted by curiosity from the village, who came to spy and mock. Carriages, however, were constantly passing them, conveying aristocratic dames and damsels in full ball-dress; and when they reached the court-yard they saw that, spacious as it was, it was too small for the many equipages that kept arriving. There were three rows of vehicles ranged along the walls, the handsome carriages which had brought millionaire beauties from Saumur or Angers standing beside the light wagons and chaises of the gentlemen farmers from Trèves or Saint-Mathurin. In the middle of the court-yard a kind of shed had been raised, and here, by the light of a blazing fire, innumerable servants in livery were warming themselves, and emptying bottles of wine standing in formidable array on a long table. "Happy innovation," remarked the baron, "and one which will land some of the carriages in the ditches on their way back. It quite reconciles me to coming on foot."

However, they hastened indoors, for it was clear that the *fête* had long since begun. All the front windows were blazing with light; the buzz of the crowd could be heard, and above it rose the music of the orchestra. In the marble hall stood numerous footmen arrayed in the Maillefert livery, and intent on showing the guests to the first floor, where several cloak-rooms, already crowded, had been thrown open. As the baron did not like crowds, he sought and found a vacant apartment, the door of which stood open like the others. In a moment Raymond was ready. But the baron was not so expeditious. He wiped his spectacles, looked for his handkerchief, and pulled on his gloves. "The arrangements are all good, so far," he said; "we will see——" But he stopped short, for in an adjoining apartment, the door of which, hidden by a curtain, stood open, a discussion could be heard going on. "Hush!" said the baron, and without the smallest shame he went toward the curtain.

"It is really most extraordinary," said a sharp, imperious female voice;

"it is incredible that you have not begun your toilette. Are you crazy, Simone? What on earth have you been doing?"

"You know, mamma," was the reply, in a sweet, pure tone, "I was attending to the last preparations for your *fete*."

"That is precisely what I complain of. Why should you perform duties which belong to my majordomo?"

"That may be, mamma, but my superintendence has certainly saved fifteen hundred or two thousand francs."

"Enough! This passion for economy is simply disgusting."

"And yet I should never have been able to serve you or my brother without it."

"Nice services! Rather than mortgage your meadows at Authion you have allowed Philippe to sell his property."

"I told you why, mamma. My income belongs to you and my brother, but neither of you shall touch the capital."

"Simone!"

"Yes—I mean what I say. You need never hope for concessions or weakness on this point. I shall defend my property, and if I die you will find that the capital will still be beyond your reach. You and Philippe will always have enough to live on no matter what you do. The Mailleferts shan't die in the almshouse."

If the baron had been alone and free to do as he pleased, he would have slipped under the sofa rather than have lost the end of this discussion, which threw such a startling light on the relative positions of the duchess and her daughter. Unfortunately, he was not alone. Raymond stood rooted to the floor, as it were, by surprise. He was intensely annoyed at the position in which he and the baron had been placed by a valet's stupidity in leaving this room open; and so, approaching the old engineer, he softly said: "Come, sir, let us go at once."

But the baron waved him aside. "Hush!" said he.

The discussion between mother and daughter was becoming more and more bitter, and attacks and rejoinders succeeded each other with extraordinary vivacity. "Ah, you forget yourself, Simone," cried the duchess at last. "You are wanting in respect to me—your mother—and to your brother, who is the head of the family."

"Madame!" implored the girl, "do you know there are at least five hundred persons in your rooms, and that all of them are commenting on your absence?"

"They are equally astonished at yours!"

"Not at all; for people know my dislike for society."

"They know that you affect to dislike it, and they know that it is most unnatural at your age, and they ask why it is."

"You know why, mamma."

"I know that you are the talk of the whole neighbourhood. I know that my daughter is the subject of brawls in wine shops, and that she has become a sort of heroine for foolish boys to go out and fight about. I am resolved to end all this. I won't tolerate these eccentricities for another day. No, you shan't adopt the rôle of a persecuted daughter. Your conduct is a tacit censure of mine. You have done this sort of thing long enough."

Raymond caught hold of the baron's arm. "I insist," he said, in a low, indignant voice—"I insist on your coming away this moment. Come, or I shall go and leave you alone!"

The baron was obliged to yield, but when he reached the passage he

exclaimed: "I am quite proud of the opinion this excellent duchess so gracefully expressed of us. Wine-shop brawlers, foolish boys! Well, well!"

What did Raymond care for the opinion of the duchess? "I pity Mademoiselle Simone, sir," he said.

"Yes, with such a mother her life can't be a path of roses."

"And what resignation! Not a complaint!"

"Indeed? I think, on the contrary, she complained to some purpose. But she is right, poor child!" He turned round on the stairs, and in a more serious tone than was usual with him, said: "She is a brave, good girl. I would put my hand in the fire for her, and I like my hands and dislike pain. She is proud of her name, and she has a right to be so. She sacrifices herself to this illustrious name of Maillefert. She forgets herself, her youth, her beauty, and her dowry, to become the majordomo of an extravagant mother and wasteful brother." Never, according to Raymond's idea, had he heard the baron speak so well. "It is an odd family," continued the old gentleman, "where the daughter holds the key of the strong-box and mounts guard over the cash. We live in strange times. I have already seen a father and son ruin themselves together, but I never saw a mother and son do the same thing before. It is something new. Well, well!" He descended two or three more steps and then stopped again.

"I should really like to know whom our invitation comes from; from the mother, the brother, or the sister?"

Raymond would have very much liked to know the same thing, but he made no reply.

They had now again reached the hall, where a dozen belated guests were hurrying towards the stairs. A lackey, looking as solemn as a peer of England, preceded them to the door of the reception-room, and as they gave their names, he announced them: "Monsieur Raymond Delorge. The Baron de Boursonne."

The old engineer started, as if some one had poured a torrent of ice-water down his back. "How did the fellow know I was a baron?" he grumbled.

"You told him so, sir," answered Raymond, laughing.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I heard you."

The good man shook his head. "Vanity of vanities," he murmured. "Such is the contagion of example. Give me your arm, my dear Delorge, so that we may not lose each other."

The precaution was a wise one, for the crush was great, and all the more so as a dance had just finished, and the gentlemen were looking for seats for their partners. When Mademoiselle Simone had said there were five hundred persons present she was far from the truth, for there were twice that number circulating through the three large drawing-rooms and the vast gallery which formed one wing of the château. Nothing could be more magnificent than these apartments, with their decorated ceilings, gilded cornices, large mirrors, and tall chimneys surmounted by the De Maillefert arms. And yet there was something in all this splendour which indicated past rather than present opulence. It was easy to see that these reception-rooms were seldom used. The curtains, as well as the seats against the wall, came from some furniture dealer at Angers, who had let them for a night and who would take them away in the next day.

"Wouldn't one swear," said the baron to Raymond, "that robbers had been in the place? And such is the case; but the robber is the dear duchess herself. Not being able to carry off the château, she has taken away the

furniture, the old carved woodwork, credences and antique tapestries, in fact all the artistic treasures which old families are so proud of, and which are handed down from generation to generation."

Our friends, however, were probably the only persons who proved such keen observers, for the ball was at its height, and to the gay refrains of a couple of orchestras, the fairest and wealthiest heiresses of Anjou were dancing with the simple delight of peasant girls. Mothers and chaperons sat against the walls in silk and velvet, their necks glittering with jewels and their heads covered with feathers or diamonds. At all the doors, and in the recesses of the windows, stood groups of white cravated men in conversation. Further on, from two small rooms communicating with the gallery, came the chink of gold on green tablecovers, and the sound of voices repeating the mystic words: "It is your play, I pass!" And meanwhile, lackeys were moving about carrying trays of ices, champagne, and sweetmeats.

"We have not done our duty," said the baron to Raymond. "We have not been received by any one. Where is the duchess? Hasn't she yet appeared?"

If they had listened to what was being said round about them, they would have found that other people were similarly puzzled. One over-dressed old lady, who was conversing with a stout gentleman, exclaimed: "It is her usual habit."

"Then why entertain?" was the question.

"Ah! dear marquis, when a woman has so much money, how else can she spend it?"

They both laughed knowingly; and then the marquis added: "At all events, she has never given a more superb *fête*."

"Never a more general one."

"That was what I meant to say. It must have been for some especial purpose."

"And it was."

"You know what it is then?"

"Certainly," said the marquis, and on hearing him the baron and Raymond forgot the ball and listened. "Yes," he resumed, "I am quite sure I know what the ball is given for. She wishes to marry her daughter." The old lady laughed. "Why are you amused, countess?" asked the marquis.

"Because you know very well that the girl's marriage would ruin our dear duchess. It is this little Cinderella who pays the fiddler when the duchess dances. Her husband would keep his wife's fortune, as he ought to do, instead of letting her mother and brother devour it. Go and ask the duchess for Simone's hand for your son, and see what she answers. Unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you consent to give a receipt for the dowry without receiving it."

"The stout marquis scratched his ear—which was his way of sharpening his ideas. "Perhaps you are right," he said; "but what does the duchess mean to do, then? Is she looking for a wife for Philippe?"

"Heavens and earth! what family would have him? He might find, perhaps, some ambitious merchant at Angers who would give a million or two for his name and his title, but he will never find a wife in our circle."

"I give it up, then. Come, dear countess, tell me what you know. I swear never to repeat it."

"It isn't worth the trouble, for the whole world will know in a week what I can tell you."

"Countess, I am in agony——"

"Then let me inform you that the duchess is here on an election campaign."

The marquis was so surprised that he started back, and in doing so trod on the foot of the baron, who was nearer than discretion warranted. "I beg ten thousand pardons, sir," said the marquis, graciously, and then hastily turning to the countess again he exclaimed: "What you say is incredible."

"It is true, all the same. Don't you know that the duchess is always at the Tuileries; that she goes with the court to Compiègne; and that she is seen everywhere with Maumussy's wife, and that she will, one of these days, be a lady-in-waiting to the empress?"

"A Duchess de Maillefert!"

"Precisely. When you are drowning you catch at anything, and the duchess and her son are in a very bad way. What will become of them when they have used up Simone's fortune? This is the question they ask themselves, and they have turned to the empire for an answer. They intend to obtain some sinecure—something very lucrative. Only as the empire does not give these sinecures for nothing, the duchess has promised to influence the legitimist nobility of Anjou, and lead us all to the feet of their imperial majesties."

"But it's monstrous!"

"Wait a moment. To make this dear duchess's political mission a trifle easier, the men in power have placed at her disposal a certain number of comfortable situations in the State service, which she will distribute. She has already offered me one for my son-in-law, who is not rich, as you know, and who has a large family."

"I must be dreaming, countess."

"That is to say you doubt, and you want proofs. Well look about you and you will see all the high functionaries of the department. You will see the Prefect of Saumur—and our own—the general commanding the corps d'armée, the commandant of the military school, with all the mayors, registrars of deeds, the provincial treasurers, and the inspectors."

Raymond and the baron looked at each other significantly. Their invitation was now explained.

"This being the case," rejoined the marquis, "I shall say good-night to the duchess, and let her understand that none of us will cross her threshold again. But where is she? What an extraordinary house! Not a lady to do the honours. Have you seen Mademoiselle Simone?"

"Not yet."

"And Philippe?"

"Ah! he must be in the card-room."

At this moment there was a movement among the throng, and as Raymond and the baron raised themselves on tip-toe, they saw the duchess and her daughter on the threshold.

X.

MOTHER and daughter looked like two sisters, so lightly had the years rested on the duchess's polished brow, and so little hold had the cares of life taken on her volatile, careless, selfish nature. Besides, the art of dress had no secret for her. Renouncing her usual eccentricity for this occasion—perhaps on account of her mission—she wore one of those exquisitely simple toilettes

which will always be the envy and the despair of provincial belles—toilettes in which every detail is blended to make a perfect whole. Her dress was of sea-green hue, the upper skirt being caught up with branches of eglantine, and the corsage being cut just low enough to show the beauty of her shoulders, but not to display them. Mademoiselle Simone, on the contrary, looked older than her years. Anxiety and care had cast a shadow over her sweet face betimes, and imparted something melancholy even to her smile. She wore a simple white dress, with a sprig of fuchsia, in her fair hair.

"Look at them," murmured the baron, "and tell me which of the two a stranger would call the elder, at first sight?"

"Mademoiselle Simone is very lovely."

"Yes, she certainly is. But, bless my soul, what strange creatures women are! Who would ever suppose that these two had just had a violent dispute?"

The worthy engineer was near-sighted. If his eyes had been as keen as his mental powers of observation, he would have detected that the colour on the duchess's cheeks was not natural, and that there was still an angry light in her eyes. He would have seen, too, that Simone was deadly pale, and that a tear trembled on her long lashes. But Raymond saw this, and he sighed.

She was now only a step or two from him, leaning on her mother's arm as they passed down the long gallery. Strangely enough, their guests by no means crowded eagerly around them—they were confronted on all sides by grave faces, constrained smiles and stately bows. The fact is, the story told by the countess to her friend had made the round of the rooms, and many of the Legitimist nobles had sworn never to enter Maillefert again. Raymond, indeed, heard one gentleman say: "It is an abominable snare, and but for my daughter, who is crazy to dance a little longer, I should go away at once."

The duchess was too keen not to divine what was going on, and to realize the disastrous results of her combinations. But she was also too much a woman of the world not to know how to hide her impressions and control her countenance. The more she met with reserve and disapproval the more gracious and smiling she became, till she elicited at least some few words of common-place politeness even from the most hostile.

"This is very curious," said the baron to Raymond, "and very interesting. Let us follow the duchess."

Having crossed the gallery, Madame de Maillefert had entered one of the cardrooms, where several young men were playing. She paused in front of a table on which several little piles of gold could be seen. "Are you not playing very high, gentlemen?" said the duchess.

One of the young men hastily raised his head. He was fair-haired, with a glass in his eye, and a very high standing collar; his waistcoat being secured by a single button, while the sleeves of his coat were ridiculously broad. "No, indeed, my dear mother," he answered; "there are a dozen of us, and only three hundred louis are on the table. It is a very mild little game, I assure you."

At this moment his adversary played, and the young duke dashed at his cards on the table in evident irritation. "It's clear that I'm not in luck to-night," he said.

Mademoiselle Simone gently laid her hand on his shoulder, at the same time whispering: "This ill-luck is a just punishment. Are you not ashamed to be here, when there are pretty girls in want of a partner?"

"That's a good joke!" he answered, sulkily. "The idea of my dancing a quadrille! Gentlemen, do you hear what my sister says?" and he went on with his play.

"The king!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Philippe! dear Philippe!" coaxed his sister.

"I must say I don't think much of that young gentleman," muttered the baron to Raymond. "He's perfectly ridiculous with his hair parted in the middle, his eye-glass, his idiotic laugh, and his self-sufficient air!"

This was precisely Raymond's opinion, but he did not reply, for he was too much occupied in watching the duchess and her daughter, who had just seated themselves on a sofa in the gallery. "Now is our time," said the baron. "We will go and pay our respects to the ladies."

"Is it necessary?" objected Raymond.

"I should say that the most ordinary politeness required it."

"But I——"

The baron interrupted him. "Do you fear an allusion to your duel? You mustn't be disturbed—I doubt if these ladies have even heard of it. Our conjectures were entirely false. You heard what that old lady said—it is to our profession as State engineers that we owe our invitations. No one knows us here."

To their great surprise, however, just as the baron made his best bow before the duchess, an old gentleman standing beside her exclaimed, "The Baron de Boursonne, Madame la Duchesse, the great engineer who has the charge of the works on the Loire."

The duchess made some complimentary remark, but the worthy man hardly waited for its termination before he presented—"Monsieur Raymond Delorge, my friend and assistant."

Redder than any poppy, Raymond bowed in his turn, but not so low that he did not perceive Mademoiselle Simone's very forehead suffused with a flush deeper than his own, nor so quickly that he did not surprise a vivid gleam in her eyes, and a gesture promptly repressed, which indicated that her first impulse had been to hold out her hand.

The young fellow's heart was thrilled. "She knows of it," he said to himself, "and she is grateful."

The baron had noticed nothing of all this. He was deep in conversation with the gentleman who had addressed him by name, and who evidently was assisting the duchess in her political undertaking. However, this same individual soon broached such extraordinary theories respecting the coming elections, that the old engineer hastily interrupted him. "As I understand you, sir," he said, "you would like to turn the Loire into an election agent. You would like to use it to inundate the property of the folks who vote wrongly, and—and order it to respect that of the peasants who vote well. It is a brilliant idea. But rather a difficult one to carry into execution. Ask Monsieur Delorge."

But Raymond was not near enough to answer. He had seen Mademoiselle Simone leave her mother's side, and obeying an irresistible impulse he had followed her through the crowd, and finally stationed himself in a spot whence he could watch every expression on her face. She was sitting near two old ladies who were both talking to her at once.

Raymond was wonder-struck by the peculiar reserve with which the duchess and her daughter were treated in their own house. While the men stood in groups ruminating over the strange news anent the political mission confided to the duchess, while the older women laughed behind their fans,

the young people only thought of deriving as much enjoyment as possible from this rare break in the monotony of country life. "It is extraordinary," thought Raymond. "One would think it a subscription ball, where each person pays his money." At this moment his attention was attracted by five young men, who one after the other bowed before Simone, and evidently asked for a dance. But she refused them all. She preferred to sit where she was, not that she was much interested in the conversation of the two old ladies, for her thoughts were evidently elsewhere. Her eyes were riveted in one direction, and anxiety, anger, and grief, alternately appeared on her expressive face. "What is it that so absorbs her," wondered Raymond.

He could see nothing from where he stood, but he gradually worked his way near Simone, and soon discovered that she was looking in the direction of the card room. "Ah! I understand," said Raymond to himself, and he quietly walked into the room."

The young duke was still playing, and by the contractions of his frivolous features, it was easy to see that luck was still against him. He fingered his cards nervously, and constantly uttered some exclamation of annoyance. "It is disgusting! Not a decent card in my hand. You have all the luck," and so on.

His adversary, who was perfectly calm and self-possessed, had a countenance indicating limited intelligence, but great obstinacy. His turn to deal came; he shuffled the cards methodically, cut, and turned up—a king. "That makes me five," he said quietly—"I have won?" and with these words he drew the pile of gold towards him. "Shall we go on?" he asked.

But Philippe rose abruptly. "No," he replied; "I shall play no more; I should lose the coat off my back to-night. Do you know, gentlemen, that I am minus fifteen thousand francs by this evening's play?"

"Pshaw!" said one of the men. "What are fifteen thousand francs to you?"

Was he speaking seriously. Philippe looked at him to ascertain, but as the other bore his gaze unmoved: "Very well: let us have one more game," he said to his late adversary—"double or quits!" The other player did not reply. "Do you refuse?" urged the duke, turning pale. "Isn't the word of a Maillefert as good as a bond?"

He spoke so loud that it was impossible for Simone not to hear him. Raymond looked at her. She had turned whiter than her dress.

"I await your decision, sir," said the duke, in an almost threatening tone.

But the other was quite undisturbed. "The decision does not depend on me," he said.

"I don't understand you."

"Listen. I belong to a well-known club at Angers, all the members of which have sworn a solemn oath never to play for any larger sum than lies on the table. Article 7th of our by-laws states that whoever breaks his word in this respect is liable to a penalty amounting to double the sum. It would, therefore, cost me thirty thousand francs to have the honour of continuing to play as you propose."

The duke looked thunderstruck. "But this is an offence," he stammered "A direct insult."

"Oh! not all, sir."

A profound silence fell on the room—a silence that was all the more dreary on account of the gay music of the orchestra in the adjoining hall

All the men at the card-tables were looking on. They evidently dreaded some violent altercation. But at this moment Mademoiselle Simone entered. Poor girl! she tried to smile, as she took Philippe's arm, and turning towards their guests she said: "Allow me to take my brother away for a few moments."

"She has done well," said one of the players, when the brother and sister had gone off.

"Yes," added another, "she has indeed. This dear duke is delightful when he talks of losing the coat off his back. He lost it long ago. It is his sister's gown that he now runs the risk of losing."

From where Raymond stood he could see the brother and the sister talking together. The girl left her brother, and, returning in a few minutes time, she slipped a little package into his hand. He then quickly turned away, and re-entered the card-room.

"Now," said he, laying a number of bank notes on the table as he spoke. "Now, sir, you can play without breaking your oath. Another game—double or quits." The duke's late adversary was startled out of his usual imperturbability. "However," resumed Philippe, "you know that this is a matter of ten thousand francs. If you win it will be twenty thousand. Of course, I do not wish to urge you if you are unwilling to run the risk of losing the amount you have already won."

The laugh was now on the duke's side. Everyone in the card-room gathered round the table, and the game began. It was watched with breathless interest, and finally Philippe won. Radiant with triumph, he now exclaimed: "Will you continue? As I am under no oath, I can play as long as you please."

It was with the keenest anxiety that Raymond had watched the play and its consequences. All that Simone had suffered he had suffered too. He had pictured to himself her agony at hearing the name she bore so insulted, for undoubtedly Philippe had been cruelly insulted. All that his adversary had said of the club rules was a piece of pure fiction, invented to get rid of those players who pocket their winnings, and who, if they lose, never pay. And plainly enough the Duke de Maillefert was looked upon as one of these. "It was this," thought Raymond, "that decided the girl to give her brother the sum he needed."

All the players stood looking on, with bated breath while the two men fought over the young girl's savings. But as soon as Raymond saw that Philippe was victorious, he darted towards Simone with the words: "He has won!"

She started as violently as if she had been asleep and a pistol had been fired off in her ear. "Sir!" she exclaimed, but as she raised her head her eyes met those of Raymond; her face flushed, and in a faint voice she uttered a few words of thanks. The two old ladies, near whom she sat, opened their eyes in astonishment at the sight of this stranger addressing Mademoiselle de Maillefert with such evident emotion. "Is he playing still?" asked Simone.

"No," answered Raymond, "he is standing near the window talking."

As he spoke his voice faltered. He had just noticed the eyes of one of the old ladies riveted upon him, and he realized that he had harmed Simone by exposing her to remark. Indignant with himself, deploring his own folly, and not knowing what to do or say, he stood for a moment in silence. Then, as an idea came to him, he asked: "Will you do me the honour, mademoiselle, to dance the next quadrille with me?"

She half rose and resealed herself. "I can't," she said. "I have declined so many times this evening. I did not feel well enough."

Raymond turned pale. "Cannot I persuade you?" he urged.

The girl's hesitation was so plain, that one of the ladies bent her head with its nodding plumes towards her. "You are too scrupulous, my child. You did not feel well enough to dance when you refused those gentlemen. That was right enough. Now that you are better, this gentleman asks you, and you accept. Take my advice, make the most of your youth, and dance."

Simone did not understand the perfidy of these words, nor did she notice the venomous smile which accompanied them. So she rose, laid her trembling hand on Raymond's arm, and went to the dancing gallery with him.

The pitiless baron would now have laughed heartily at his young friend, who moved about as if he were in a dream. He asked himself if he were a conceited fool—if the sympathy he seemed to read in this girl's eyes was not a freak of his own imagination. What mysterious affinities bound them together? How had she divined his interest in her? Ah! had they only been alone he would have fallen at her feet, and sworn fidelity forever.

However, the orchestra was playing the first bars of a quadrille, and they had only time to take their places. Raymond felt that curious eyes were fixed upon him, and that it was imperative he should control his emotion and make a few common-place remarks to his partner.

Alas! he could not think of a word to say; not one of those phrases which are usually exchanged at such moments would come to his lips. Perhaps Simone took pity on him, for she presently asked some question about the baron's undertakings. It was with all the eagerness of a drowning man snatching at a branch that Raymond answered her; and he began with amazing volubility to describe their plans and studies. "I am lost!" he said to himself, meanwhile. "She will think me a fool with this prosy scientific chatter."

However the interminable dance ended at last, and Simone asked to be taken to her mother, who sat in the same place with a little cluster of people near her. But her eyes were flashing with anger, in consequence of the acute attacks of the baron, who had almost compelled her to confess the meaning of her entertainment. Seeing her daughter on Raymond's arm, she asked in a vexed tone if she had been dancing.

"Yes, mamma."

"With this gentleman?"

"Yes."

"But I thought I heard you tell Monsieur de Luxé that you were indisposed and would not dance to-night?"

The girl seated herself without replying, and Raymond would perhaps have committed the blunder of offering some apology, had he not been touched on the shoulder. He turned and found himself face to face with the baron. "I am tired out," said the old gentleman. "Balls are not much in my line. Let us be off."

Raymond followed him, and they went towards the room where they had left their coats. But the door was shut and locked on the inside. "Well! this is nice, upon my word," grumbled the baron.

He was trying to open the door, when an old servant out of livery hastened towards him. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he asked.

"We want our coats, which are in that room."

The servant looked at them with an odd expression. "It was by a mistake," he said, "that you were shown into that room. It belongs to the suite of Miss Dodge, the English governess."

At any other time the baron would have felt it his duty to obtain all the information possible respecting this Miss Dodge, but for the moment he was greatly out of patience. "Do you mean," he asked, "that the governess has locked up our overcoats?"

"No, indeed, they have been taken away, and if you will take the trouble, gentlemen, to follow me——"

They did so, and found that everything belonging to them had been carefully removed to another room. Then they donned their overcoats and hurried down the stairs.

It was now three o'clock. The elder people had gone off, and their carriage-lamps shone through the trees along the road beside the river. Only the fanatics remained at Maillefert—those who dance until the last candle has burned out, until the last musician in the orchestra has played his final note. These indefatigable persons were in yet the gayest spirits, and their shadows could be seen whirling past the windows. The coachmen in the court-yard were dozing round the fire, except three or four of them who had become perfectly drunk and highly quarrelsome. The lanterns of the avenue had been extinguished, or rather had burned down. Occasionally a dim one was to be seen emitting more smoke than light.

"And this is what people call amusing themselves!" was the baron's philosophical remark, as he walked along. However just as he was passing through the gateway of the grounds he drew an old portfolio from his pocket and examined it by the light of the huge lantern hanging above. "Zounds!" he muttered.

"What is the matter?" asked Raymond.

"Did you leave any papers in the pocket of your overcoat?" asked the baron.

Raymond felt to see. "Yes," he replied, "two or three old letters and some visiting cards."

"So I fancied," answered the baron. "Well, what will you wager but that Mademoiselle Simone knows her discussion with her mother was overheard—and overheard by us, mind you?"

"I should be in despair if I thought so."

"Well, then, you may despair as much as you please, for nothing is more certain," rejoined the baron. "But come let us walk on, for we are heated, and the night is cool. I will prove the point to you: first, our overcoats were carefully taken from that room; next, my portfolio has been examined, and a servant was stationed near the door, which was locked."

This was clear enough, and Raymond could no longer doubt. "But why," asked he, "should you think it is the young lady who knows of our involuntary indiscretion—why not the duchess, or why not both of them?"

"You have me there!" answered the baron; "for in regard to these points I have no reasons, only a moral conviction. Still, if Madame de Maillefert had known that we possessed her secret, she would have been more civil to us out of fear—for she was hardly polite."

"True!" murmured Raymond.

"Now, how did the young lady treat you? I know she danced with you after refusing half a dozen other applications."

"Ah! sir."

"I know it, for I saw it," said the baron, laughing; but he instantly

recovered his gravity. "This noble duchess," he said in an irritated voice, "ought to be shorn of her sunny locks and dressed in a convict's garb for the rest of her days. And as for her amiable son, he ought to be sent on a voyage round the world, with a recommendation to the captain to let him feel the virtues of the cat-o'-nine tails." Then, with more moderation, he added: "If I were in your place, friend Delorge—if my good star put such a girl as this one in my path, I——"

"Well?"

"Well! She should be my wife in spite of everything. I would move mountains and scale abysses to win her. She should be my wife or my life would be a blank." He stopped short, being perhaps a little ashamed of his enthusiasm, and then suddenly, without choosing to hear Raymond's reply he exclaimed: "But here we are—and that idiot Bérú is coming down to open the door. Good-night. Sleep well. But you understand what I say—she should be my wife."

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